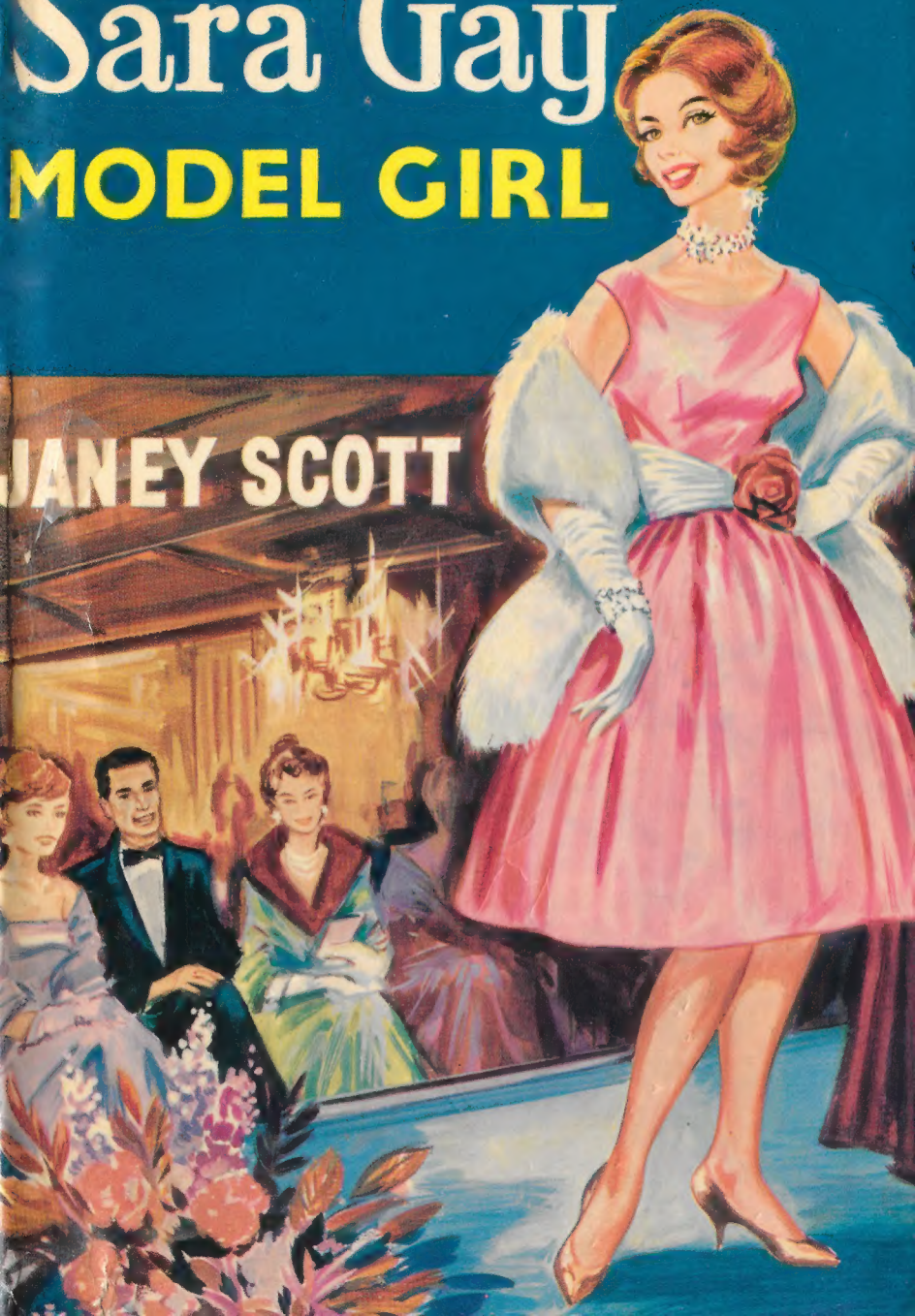


Sara Gay

MODEL GIRL

JANEY SCOTT



Sara, working in a solicitor's office, wins a local beauty contest and uses the prize money to enrol at the Lena Lane Model School where she is given a scholarship. She qualifies with flying colours and wins the Lena Lane Gold Medal, despite the opposition and intrigue of Mrs. Lane's assistant, Lydia Durack, who had wanted her niece, Nina, to win it instead.

Even winning the medal, Sara finds it difficult to get a job until one day she bumps—literally—into Peter Redgrave, who takes a set of pictures of her which bring out not only her beauty but her vital personality.

Marc Donnell, brilliant designer and owner of Donnell, a top Mayfair salon, holds an audition for a new model. Nina Durack is determined to get the job and tries to sabotage Sara's appearance on the great day. Does she succeed, or does Sara get the prize job after all . . . ?

Anyone who feels that modelling is only concerned with clothes should follow the exciting adventures of Sara Gay in the intriguing world of fashion.

CHAPTER I

THE day that Sara Gay won the beauty contest was the happiest day of her life. She had only entered it for fun, urged on by her friend, Beryl, who worked in the same dreary solicitor's office.

"What have you got to *lose*?" Beryl asked. "You're by far the prettiest girl in Frimpton."

Beryl, short and plump, certainly had no claim to beauty herself, but there was no trace of jealousy in her admiration of her auburn-haired friend.

"It takes more than prettiness to be a beauty queen," Sara had protested.

"Well, whatever it takes, I'm sure you've got it," the loyal Beryl had said. "Do have a go, Sara. It'll be such fun and the first prize is £25. Just think what one could do with all that money!"

Sara sighed and gazed around the gloomy office of Messrs. Thistlewaite, Dunn and Thistlewaite and the forbidding rows of dusty files lining the walls. She jabbed disconsolately at the keys of the heavy, long-carriage typewriter. . . . *aforesaid. And the party of the third part heretofore . . .*

"Damn it!" she muttered, her fingers catching in the wrong keys and mysteriously producing plus signs in place of the next letter. All these awful musty documents,

she thought to herself, and no commas, and not being allowed to rub anything out but having to start all over again each time you made a mistake. And she was always making mistakes. She looked despairingly at her friend, placidly munching toffees and typing with a competence which she herself would never achieve, not if she sat at this wretched desk for the next hundred years! Miserably she tore the ruined sheet from her typewriter and started again.

. . . . *aforesaid*. And the party of the third part heretofore Again her fingers tangled in the keys.

"That does it!" she exclaimed, the words tumbling out in her exasperation as she ripped the paper from her machine a second time. "You're right, Beryl. What have I got to lose?"

But now, hurrying home with prize-winning cup and the cheque for £25 in her purse, she began to have second thoughts. It was one thing to enter a beauty contest; quite another to win it and know that Frimpton, the small sea-side town where she lived, where her father worked for the Council and her mother was deputy chairman of the Townswomen's Guild, must already be buzzing with the news. Grimly she pictured her father's face as he picked up his copy of the "Evening Echo" and saw his daughter splashed across the front page in a revealing white swimsuit.

As she had feared, the news had reached home before her, for as she walked up the garden path her young brother, Tony, came rushing to meet her.

"You've done it this time!" he breathed and, small brother fashion, began to caper around her, pretending to be a press photographer. "Please, Miss Monroe, just one more shot!"

Seizing her tormentor by the shoulders, Sara bundled him inside the house, just in time to hear her mother's voice calling ominously from the living room:

"Is that you, Sara? Your father and I want to have a word with you."

"Golly, you're not half going to catch it," said Tony and, dodging expertly out of reach, he disappeared in the direction of the kitchen.

Nerving herself, Sara entered the living-room and saw her parents sitting on the couch with the "Evening Echo" spread between them.

Reading the headlines upside down as best she could, she was appalled to see she had made an even bigger splash than she had expected.

Mr. Gay was a spare, good-looking man with humorous grey eyes. But this Saturday evening it seemed that his eyes were anything but amused.

"Well now, look who's here," he exclaimed. "Our local beauty queen in person. How does it feel to be a celebrity?"

"Sara, how could you do such a thing?" her mother reproached. "What are people going to think?"

Sara looked down at the carpet, and blinked back the tears. Suddenly, unable to believe her ears, she heard her father chuckle.

"Don't act so well, Mother, or our young imp will believe you mean it."

Looking up, Sara saw the grey eyes twinkling again and she hurled herself on him, her arms round his neck.

"Oh Dad, you're not mad with me then?"

"Of course not. We're proud of our little girl, aren't we, Helen?"

"Speak for yourself," Mrs. Gay rejoined, but Sara knew her mother well enough to sense the laughter bubbling beneath the words. She flung her arms around her mother's neck and hugged her comfortable figure until Mrs. Gay begged for mercy.

"But why didn't you tell us you were going in for it?"

Mr. Gay asked. "Then we could have been there to enjoy the excitement."

"I only put my name down for a joke," Sara confessed. "It never dawned on me I stood a chance of winning. It was just that I didn't want anyone there to see me make an idiot of myself."

"You didn't make an idiot of yourself," her father reassured her comfortably. "You made a big success. Come on, you haven't even shown us what you won yet."

Sara stood the beautiful silver cup on the table. "I can keep it until next year," she explained. "After that it goes to the new prize winner."

Then, very proudly, she produced the cheque from her bag and smoothed out the creases before laying it down on the table next to the cup.

"That's going straight into your post office savings account," Mrs. Gay announced, looking wonderingly at the cheque and even more wonderingly at her surprising young daughter.

"Nonsense," Mr. Gay expostulated. "That's much too ordinary. I'll tell you what, Sara. On Monday I'll take you to see my bank manager and we'll open an account for you."

Although the thought of a cheque book of her very own seemed the most thrilling thing she could possibly imagine, Sara shook her head.

"No, Dad," she said, her voice apologetic but firm, "I know just what I'm going to do with this money. I want to train to be a model."

"A model!" her mother exclaimed. "Don't be silly. It's one thing to take first prize in Frimpton, but I daresay there's a girl as pretty as you in every town in the country!"

Stubbornly Sara shook her red gold head. "It wasn't only local girls in the competition. There were plenty of summer visitors too."

"Then I expect the judges were only too happy to pick a resident," her father replied.

"But they weren't local judges, Dad. Please," she begged, "at least let me go for an interview. After all, they can only turn me down."

Mr. and Mrs. Gay looked at one another.

"Very well," her mother said quietly. "Write to a model school and see what happens. But if they don't think you're good enough, you must promise to put the idea right out of your head."

"I promise," Sara said quickly. "And I'll write off at once."

It was one thing to decide on a course of action, Sara learned, but quite another to set about doing it.

"I can't find any addresses of model schools in the directory," she complained to her friend on Monday morning. "But there must be *some* way of getting them."

"Why not try the library?" suggested Beryl. "The nearest model schools will be in London and the library's bound to have a classified directory."

Sara hugged Beryl delightedly. "What would I do without you?"

"Use your *own* brains," came the reply. "Now let's do some work or Mr. Dunn will be on our tails!"

At lunchtime the two girls bolted down their sandwiches and hurried along to the local public library where they found a London Classified Directory. They turned to the section marked "M" and scanned page after page until they found the magic words "Model School". There were four names and addresses given and Sara wrote them down in her diary.

"What about seeing if you can borrow a couple of books on modelling?" Beryl suggested. "It'll give you an idea of what you're letting yourself in for!"

Realising the truth of this, Sara followed her friend's suggestion and left the library laden with a number of

official looking books on careers and several exciting autobiographies by successful ex-models.

That evening she could hardly wait for supper to be over before hurrying to her bedroom and settling down with the books. It wasn't all honey being a model, Sara discovered as she began to read. Indeed anyone who thought model girls ethereal creatures receiving fat fees for the joyful task of drifting around a couple of hours a day in fabulous clothes, had another think coming! There was a lot more hard work, long hours, cut-throat competition to the job than anyone could ever guess at from the surface glamour. Yet far from feeling put off, the more Sara read, the more she knew this was the one job she wanted to do and before going to bed she wrote to the four model schools whose addresses she had, setting out her qualifications and physical statistics.

Sliding the letters into the letter box on her way to work next morning, Sara felt as though she were posting her heart with them. They would not reach London till the next morning and the earliest she could expect any replies was the end of the week. Never had days passed more slowly and the office of Messrs. Thistlewaite, Dunn and Thistlewaite seemed more prison-like than ever.

On Thursday she received three answers, but the news they brought was bad. One school had closed several years previously and the other two wrote to say that their courses were fully booked and there would be no vacancies for a year. They would be delighted, they both said, to place Sara's name on their waiting list.

A year's wait! Sara's heart sank for only one chance remained—the Lena Lane Model School, whose course was the longest and most thorough and where the fees were accordingly the highest of the four.

"I expect they'll be booked up too," she thought despondently, and the next morning listened half in hope, half in fear, for the postman's knock. When it came she pre-

climbed herself into the hall. Yes, there was a letter for her.

Her fingers trembling, she ripped open the square, white envelope and read the typewritten letter, breathing a sigh of relief as she saw that there were a few vacancies for the new course.

"You will appreciate that a personal interview is essential for all candidates before enrolment," the writer stated, "and if you would care to attend at the above address next Wednesday at 11.30 a.m. Mrs. Lane will be happy to see you. Please write to confirm that this appointment will be convenient."

"Wednesday," Sara thought, and immediately wondered what she should wear at the interview. Would a suit or a dress be better? Should she wear a hat and was there time to get her shoes heeled?

"It's really beginning," she told Beryl as they took the covers from their typewriters that morning. "It means I'll have to ask Mr. Dunn if he'll let me have the day off."

"You'd better do it before you start work," Beryl advised. "If you wait too long you'll get cold feet."

"Right as always," Sara grinned, and not giving herself a chance to change her mind she knocked on the door of her employer's office.

"So you want Wednesday off, eh?" Mr. Dunn exclaimed in his precise voice and surveyed his young employee. "Not enough glamour in this office, I suppose, for our beauty queen."

Sara blushed and twisted about anxiously as she waited for his decision. She began to wish she had waited until Wednesday and then sent a note saying she was ill, but she had always hated that sort of deceit.

Mr. Dunn peered at her from under his pince-nez. "I suppose this means we'll be losing you, Miss Gay?"

"It's just for an interview," she explained. "I don't even know whether I'll be accepted."

"Hhm, a pity," Mr. Dunn said, ignoring the diffident interruption and following his own thoughts. "If you do leave us we'll miss you."

"I don't think I'll ever make a really *good* secretary," Sara said apologetically.

"Maybe not." Mr. Dunn smiled tightly. "But there are compensations. Even an elderly solicitor is not averse to having his afternoon cup of tea brought to him by such a remarkably pretty young lady."

This compliment coming from such an unexpected source made Sara blink.

"Then I may take Wednesday off?" she pleaded.

"This once then. But if you do decide to leave us, a fortnight's notice would be appreciated."

"I'll remember," Sara promised. "And thank you for being so kind."

"All right, all right, back to work now," Mr. Dunn said testily. "You've wasted enough of my time for one day." But as she reached the door, he cleared his throat and called after her. "And, umm, Miss Gay, good luck on Wednesday."

Sara wanted to hug him though he would probably have collapsed on the spot if she had. "Whoever would have believed it," she thought as she returned to her typewriter. "Dried up Mr. Dunn has got a heart after all!"

CHAPTER II

WEARING her new blue linen suit and beige shoes with high stiletto heels, Sara emerged from Victoria Station into the hurly-burly of London on a bright summer morning.

"Gosh," she thought nervously, dodging between on-coming taxis and cars, "will I ever get used to all this bustle and noise?"

Everyone around her seemed to be in a hurry and all of them seemed to know exactly where they were going. There was the smell of melting tar from a new-mended roadway and petrol fumes which she breathed in rapturously as if it was some rare perfume. "London," she told herself excitedly, London, the gateway to all her dreams and ambitions!

The Lena Lane Model School lay at the back of the station in a dusty square full of tall, decaying Victorian houses, and Sara had to ask directions of three different people before she finally found it.

Two doors away from the school she paused to check on her make-up and change her white gloves for the fresh ones she carried in her bag. That at least was one model girl trick she knew already!

The door of No. 17 creaked open under her hand and Sara found herself in an ill-lit hallway with a mass of

brown paintwork, large-patterned wallpaper and bare boards underfoot. An uncarpeted staircase stretched up in front of her and from an upstairs room she could hear a badly tuned piano being strummed monotonously. It was so different from anything she had been expecting that she went back to the door to make certain she had come to the right address. But looking at the small brass plaque fixed to the door she saw that she was indeed at the right address. This was the Lena Lane Model School—and a pretty old-fashioned school it was.

Sara swallowed her disappointment. She had been expecting something so different; something beautiful and luxurious with chandeliers hanging from the ceiling, thick carpets on the floors and a wide Adam staircase with beautiful girls in long dresses sauntering elegantly down.

Just then a decidedly inelegant girl in shorts and a cotton blouse, her long hair streaming behind her, came tearing down the stairs with a tremendous clatter.

"Looking for someone?" she called as she disappeared into some dark basement region. "Try the first door on the left. Polly will put you right."

Sara tapped shyly on the door indicated. There was no response but she could hear the clatter of a typewriter so she knocked again, louder this time. A voice called: "Come in," and pushing open the door she found herself in a small, untidy cubby-hole partitioned off from a larger room. The high ceiling made the office seem even narrower than it was in reality.

The girl at the desk looked up and pushed her spectacles more firmly on her nose, studying Sara with frank curiosity. She was a skinny girl with a slightly spotty face and hair in an unfashionable frizz.

"I suppose you're a would-be model?" the girl asked. "I can always tell."

Sara nodded and nervously handed over the letter which showed that she had an appointment.

"You're in luck," the girl said, taking the letter from her. "Mrs. Lane's on her own this morning. So you'll be spared Mme. Durack giving you the once over. That's Mrs. Lane's assistant," she explained and shivered exaggeratedly. "Regular sergeant-major, she is."

She went across to an inner door from which she emerged a few minutes later to announce, "Mrs. Lane won't keep you waiting long. You're quite a bit early you know."

"I caught an early train to make sure of getting here on time," Sara told her.

"Oh, the keen type," the girl said. She swept a wooden kitchen chair free of a pile of Harpers and Vogues, dusted the seat perfunctorily with her hand, and indicated Sara should take a seat. Then she fed paper into her machine and began rattling away with an efficiency that reminded Sara of Beryl. When the girl looked up from her typing, Sara asked impulsively, "Wouldn't you like to be a model too?"

"What, with my face and figure! Can't you just see it. Besides, it's a dog's life. I wouldn't fancy standing around all day posing in a hundred different dresses. I ask you, what sort of life is that for a girl? Anyway, it's not for Polly Wilson, that much I can tell you." At that moment a buzzer shrilled on her desk, cutting her short. "That's Mrs. Lane now. She's ready to see you. Just knock on that door over there and walk straight in."

Sara did as she was told and found herself in a large, bare office, only slightly less bleak than the room she had just left. There were two desks, only one of them occupied at present, some filing cabinets and a small square of faded carpet in the centre of the floor. The uncurtained windows were dusty and smeared and the only touch of glamour that Sara could see were the signed, framed photographs on the walls of exceptionally lovely girls.

A tall, stately woman with a once beautiful face and a

mass of untidy white hair rose from behind the larger of the two desks and held out her hand.

"Come and sit down, my dear," she said graciously.

Very conscious of her movements and posture, Sara sat down in a chair beside the desk.

Mrs. Lane studied a file. "I see from your letter that you won first prize in a local beauty contest and then decided that you want to be a model."

"It wasn't really like that." The girl's voice was unexpectedly low and husky, "I've *always* wanted to be a model. Winning that competition gave me the confidence to do something about it. And enough money," she added, "to pay for the training."

"Well, the first thing we have to do is check your measurements," Mrs. Lane said. "That's a job I usually leave to my assistant. But as she's not here at the moment, there's no reason why I shouldn't do it myself."

Taking a tape measure from a drawer in her desk and telling Sara to stand up straight she made quick notes of the girl's measurements.

"Now under here," she said and telling Sara to kick off her shoes she led her to a height measure. After taking it she checked her hands and feet. "You have nice legs," she said approvingly, "and your feet are small for your height. That's in your favour."

She sat down again at her desk. "I hope you realise that we don't accept every applicant? Only those we believe have a good chance of making the grade and whom we feel we can put on our agency books. That's why all these points are so important."

"I hope I'll be one of the lucky ones," Sara said so fervently that the woman smiled at her eagerness.

"I expect you think being a model's a very glamorous job, don't you?"

Sara laughed. "If I did, I'm beginning to think again pretty fast."

"Ah, I can see Polly's been having a go at you!"

"Polly *was* a bit of a surprise," Sara admitted.

"Well, it wouldn't be much use having a failed would-be model in my outer office, would it now? But I can see you're not inclined to agree with Polly's idea of the life of a model girl. Well, if it's not the glamour that attracts, what *is* it then?"

"I think it all started the day we came up from school to visit the Victoria and Albert Museum," Sara said slowly, and a dreamy look came into her hazel eyes with their strange green fleck. "I'd never seen so many beautiful things before. Jewellery and old furniture and miniatures and exquisite hand-painted fans and that wonderful, wonderful collection of old dresses. I wanted to reach out and touch them, feel those marvellous old silks for myself. For weeks afterwards I kept seeing all the girls who must once have worn them. I thought then that I'd like to be a dress designer. But I'm no good at drawing. I'm no good at sewing either, if it comes to that. But I do love clothes; not just to wear them, but the feel of them, velvet and furs and silks and satins. And colour too. And the way a piece of perfectly dead cloth can suddenly come alive in your hands. I realised that's where I should work—where people are making and wearing beautiful clothes. Instead of which," she ended unhappily, "I'm sitting all day in a dreary solicitor's office surrounded by musty old files and typing a lot of silly words that mean nothing to me at all!"

"My poor child," Mrs. Lane cried, "I can see we're going to have to rescue you from that dreadful office at all costs! If that's the way you feel—provided you've got the stamina—I can't see any reason why you shouldn't make a first-class model. You've got the looks and the figure and you certainly have the enthusiasm. You do have your parents' permission, don't you?" she asked anxiously. "That's most important. Because, apart from the fee, there's a form we always ask them to sign."

"You don't have to worry about that," Sara said confidently. "And it's all right about the fees too. My prize money will cover that."

"Fifty pounds seems a great deal of money to win at a local beauty contest," Mrs. Lane said.

"It wasn't fifty pounds," Sara exclaimed. "It was twenty-five." Then her eyes opened wide in alarm as she realised the meaning of the Principal's words. "But that book I read," she stammered, "it said it cost twenty-five pounds for the training course."

"What book would that be?"

"The one about the Lena Lane School. I got it from the local library."

"My poor child," Mrs. Lane said, genuinely upset. "That book was published more than ten years ago. I'm afraid the price of almost everything has doubled since then. And our fees with it. Perhaps your parents might be willing to help?" she suggested.

Sara shook her head. "They said I could do the training since it was my own money and they didn't want to stand in my way, but they don't really approve. Anyway, they've already paid for my secretarial training and I couldn't ask them for any more help."

"If it was only up to me I'd take you," Mrs. Lane sighed. "I've a feeling that you could turn out to be one of our most promising pupils. But I'm afraid there's not only my own money in this but other people's as well. And besides," she nodded in the direction of the vacant desk, "I also have my assistant, Mme. Durack, to contend with. She's forever telling me I'm not businesslike enough." She stopped suddenly, a smile lighting her face. "Wait a minute, I think I see a way of getting round this. We award a special scholarship to any girl we consider showing outstanding possibilities. So far this year none of our students has qualified for this award, although I must tell you we do have one girl at present in the running.

However" She hesitated momentarily and then appeared to make up her mind. "Look, my dear, I don't want to promise anything, but it so happens that today we have a director's meeting here when we intend to make a decision about the award. Could you come back here this afternoon, do you think, and let the Board have a look at you?"

Sara nodded her head, too choked with excitement to speak. She had been promising herself an exploration of London and an afternoon's window shopping, but this was a great deal more important.

"Two forty-five then," Mrs. Lane said, "and make sure you're back promptly. I don't want to raise your hopes, but if the other directors share my own feelings"

As she was speaking the door opened and a tall, thin woman, her black hair caught back in a heavy chignon, made her entrance.

"This must be Mme. Durack," Sara decided, taking in the woman's magnificent carriage and slinky elegance as she swept to her desk. Her features were hard though, and thin lips and somewhat pinched nostrils marred the classical symmetry of her features.

Sara tried to stop herself wriggling as she felt sharp black eyes scrutinising her through heavy dark-framed spectacles.

"Lydia," Mrs. Lane said, "this is Sara Gay. You remember she wrote to us?"

"Ah, yes." The woman's accent was so slight as to be almost imperceptible. "The young lady who won the beauty competition in—now, where was it?"

"Frimpton," Sara muttered, low-voiced and hesitant; for some reason this elegant woman robbed her of her confidence.

"Of course. But how stupid of me! Frimpton." The tone of voice made it sound more remote than the North Pole. "So you think you could be a model?"

"I'd like to be."

"You're a pretty child," Mme. Durack remarked. "If you are willing to work, I see no reason why you shouldn't do well."

"Unfortunately, Lydia, we have a problem." Briefly Lena Lane explained the situation to her assistant. "So," she ended, "I've told Sara to come back this afternoon and we shall let the Board decide."

"But Lena," the other woman objected, "surely you have not forgotten that—"

"Of course I haven't," Mrs. Lane said quickly. "Although I still feel that if we do as you wish we shall be accused of favouritism. Besides, I should like this child to have her chance, and it will make for competition."

Lydia Durack's thin mouth tightened and her hostile eyes raked Sara from head to foot. "She's far too short," she snapped, jerking her head in Sara's direction.

"I'm five-foot six," Sara protested, "and I'm still growing!"

"Of course, my dear," Mrs. Lane said reassuringly. "Run along now, and enjoy your lunch and come back this afternoon. Promptly, mind."

She smiled kindly at the girl and rose from behind her desk to indicate the interview was at an end. Turning, Sara walked to the door trying to glide gracefully as if she were already a trained model, but as she passed in front of Lydia Durack's desk and felt her black eyes boring into her back, she stumbled against the frayed edge of the square of carpet. Clutching the doorhandle in a wild effort to break her fall, she made a precipitous and undignified exit from the room.

"Fine model girl I'll make!" Sara told herself ruefully as she found herself back in the outer office.

"How did it go?" Polly asked cheerfully.

Sara gave her a watery grin and told her of her disastrous exit, trying to make a joke of it.

"Cheer up," Polly said, "you're not expected to be the finished product yet. But tell me, have you been accepted?"

Sara explained about the difficulties of the fee and said she had been asked to return that afternoon to see the directors.

Polly whistled and looked knowing. "No wonder old Lydia didn't take kindly to you. Probably trying to put a spell on you with those gimlet eyes of hers. Every time I see her driving off in her sports car I think it should be a broomstick instead! Still as long as Mrs. Lane liked you, that's what really counts round—" She broke off to answer the telephone. "Hold on a minute, please." Her hand over the receiver, she told Sara comfortingly: "Now don't you worry, kid. Go off and get a good lunch inside you, and you'll feel fine."

As she was walking down the front steps Sara heard footsteps hurrying to catch her up. She looked round, expecting to find Polly and was surprised to see Lydia Durack smiling down at her.

"You walk well, child, I'll say that for you." The tone was grudging, but Sara had the feeling that the compliment was sincere.

"Thank you, Mme. Durack," Sara said shyly.

Her hand on the doorhandle of the smart red coupé drawn up at the kerb, Lydia said: "I have a lunch appointment with my niece. But first I'll show you where to get an excellent lunch at a reasonable price. Don't look so worried. I won't eat you. Come on, jump in!"

Sara obeyed, amazed by the woman's friendliness after her previous hostility, and in a few minutes Lydia drew up outside a small café with delicious-looking home-made cakes in the window.

"They have a set lunch," Lydia explained. "And everything is home cooked. Far better for you than those stodgy sandwiches and chocolate bars I know you girls feed

yourselves on the minute you're left to your own devices."

"Thank you very much for the lift," Sara said as she climbed out on to the pavement.

"That's all right. I'm happy to be of help. And we shall see you back at the School promptly at three-fifteen?"

"But I thought it was—"

"Three-fifteen," the woman repeated emphatically. "And mind you are punctual." With an elegant wave of her hand she let in the clutch and drew smoothly away from the kerb.

The food was as good as Mme. Durack had promised and the two middle-aged women in chintz overalls who ran the café reminded Sara of her mother.

"How kind of Lydia Durack to have recommended such a nice place," Sara thought, and pondered on the change in the woman's attitude. It just went to show how wrong it was to judge anyone on first impressions.

Lingering rather a long time over her coffee, it was after two o'clock when finally she paid her bill and left the café. The afternoon sun was warm on her back as she sauntered along, watching the hurrying crowds of Londoners, and pausing to study the displays in the shop windows.

Turning down by the side of Victoria Station she could hear a clock striking a quarter to three. "Funny," she mused vaguely, "if Mme. Durack hadn't sounded so positive, I'd have sworn Mrs. Lane said two forty-five." Suddenly Sara stopped dead. "But she *did* say two forty-five!" In her ears, quite plainly now, she could hear Mrs. Lane's well-modulated voice saying: "*Two forty-five then . . . not a minute later . . .*"

Horror mounted in her and she turned and began to run through the side streets, praying that her footsteps were leading her in the right direction.

"But why, why?" she asked herself helplessly as she ran. "Why should Lydia Durack want to play such a rotten trick on me? What possible reason could she have?"

CHAPTER III

THE clock on the wall showed three as Sara, panting and dishevelled, her red-gold hair tumbling around her face, burst into Polly's cubby-hole.

"Gosh!" Polly gasped. "Mrs. Lane's furious with you. Where on earth have you been? And what an awful mess you look. No time for that now," she snapped, as Sara took a mirror from her bag and tried to restore smoothness to her tangled hair. "My orders are to take you upstairs the minute you get here."

Grabbing Sara by the hand she raced up the uncarpeted stairs two at a time and came to a halt outside a door on the second landing. She knocked loudly and as a voice called "Come in," she opened the door and pushed the panic-stricken Sara in.

Bewildered, Sara found herself standing alone at one end of a long polished table while five pairs of eyes stared at her with expressions ranging from surprise to consternation.

Mrs. Lane half-rose from her place at the right hand of the elderly Chairman, then sat down again abruptly. "Well Sara," she said reproachfully, "so you decided to come back after all?"

"I . . ." Sara began, then felt Lydia Durack's black eyes boring into her face from the lower end of the table. "Just

you try it, that's all," the eyes seemed to be saying. "Just you try it and see what good it does you!" Suddenly Sara realised that if she did tell her story, Lydia Durack would immediately deny it. And who was likely to believe *her* rather than the Assistant Principal?

"I lost my way," she lied feebly, and saw the woman relax almost imperceptibly. "I'm dreadfully sorry, Mrs. Lane," Sara apologised. "I ran all the way."

Sara's distress was so apparent that the Chairman took pity on her. "Well, no great harm done, young lady, though I should tell you we were just on the point of declaring the meeting closed."

"This is our Chairman, Mr. Matthew Tarquin," Mrs. Lane told Sara, who at once recognised the name of the great couturier. She stared fascinated at the delicate-looking old man with his thick grey hair rising above a high domed forehead.

Apart from Mrs. Lane and Lydia Durack, there were three other members of the Board, a woman and two men, who gradually began to assume separate shapes and identities for Sara as her initial panic subsided. Seated on the Chairman's left hand was an exquisitely groomed, diminutive woman with the proportions and delicate colouring of a Dresden shepherdess, whom Sara heard addressed as Mrs. van der Witt, and on the opposite side of the table, next to Mrs. Lane, a plump old-young man with a world weary face wearing a pale suit and voluminous black bow tie. Sitting by Lydia Durack, and apparently on intimate terms with her, was a stocky, red-faced man in a loud check suit, called Charles Murray.

"So this is the other girl we're to consider for the scholarship?" asked the Dresden shepherdess in an American accent. "Walk up and down, child, and let's take a look at you."

Sara did as she was told, gradually losing her self-consciousness, even though she was horribly aware of her

smudged make-up and untidy appearance. It was all such a dreadful farce. Whatever chance she might have stood of winning the scholarship must surely have gone now, thanks to Lydia Durack who sat there with such a smug smile on her face that Sara longed to hit her!

"You're right, Lena," Matthew Tarquin said. "She walks well already."

Sara shot the old gentleman a grateful smile and felt herself relaxing. As always her smile lit up her face, even though her present attempt at gaiety was only a pale, lopsided shadow of her usual glowing joyfulness.

"Fat lot of good it is for a model to walk well if she doesn't know how to be punctual," Charles Murray commented, his loud voice as coarse as his appearance. Sara flushed and it seemed to her that, having delivered his statement, he turned his fleshy countenance to Lydia Durack for approval.

Meantime, the man with the bow tie was studying Sara from under heavy-lidded eyes. In dreamy, high-pitched tones he remarked to Mrs. Lane: "She needs amber. Amber, my darling, and simply masses of gold brocade!"

"My dear Lucien!" Mrs. Lane laughed, amused but quite obviously pleased by his remark.

Lucien? Sara realised that this must be the famous fashion photographer. What a very odd man! She wondered fleetingly what he meant by his talk of amber and gold?

"Sit down, Sara," the Dresden shepherdess invited, and Sara did so, grateful to the American woman for troubling to put an embarrassed youngster at her ease.

Gradually, under the careful questioning of the great couturier, Matthew Tarquin, and of Mrs. van der Witt who, Sara learned, was the editor of "Dress", a leading fashion magazine, she felt her nervousness disappear, and soon she was as glowing and eager as she had been earlier that morning in Mrs. Lane's office. In fact, at the end of ten

minutes she was chatting away so naturally that it was a surprise to hear Mrs. Lane saying, at a sign from the Chairman: "All right, Sara. That's all. Run along now and we'll be in touch with you."

At the door, Sara turned and, on sudden impulse, swept a low court courtsey to Matthew Tarquin and his co-directors before leaving the room.

But just as she was closing the door Mrs. van der Witt's rather piercing voice reached her. "Yes, yes, Lena, I do agree. A charming, intelligent girl and a born mannequin. But the first duty of any model girl is tidiness and punctuality!"

"You've really had it now," Sara told herself and she crept down the stairs, fighting back her tears.

On the way out, she looked in to say goodbye to Polly and found that another girl was sitting on a corner of the cluttered desk. She was dark and very slender and something in the carriage of her head seemed to Sara mysteriously familiar.

"You must be Sara Gay," the girl said in drawling tones. "My aunt told me about you. You're not at all as I expected."

"Your aunt?" Sara asked, puzzled.

"She means Mme. Durack," Polly intervened. "This is Nina, Mme. Durack's niece."

The girl laughed affectedly and fitted a cigarette into a long, jewelled holder. Flicking an expensive lighter to it she blew a cloud of smoke in Sara's face. "Poor Aunt Lydia," she remarked patronisingly. "How ever could she have seen *you* as any sort of competitor for the scholarship!"

Suddenly everything fell into place and Sara knew the reason for the cruel trick Lydia Durack had played on her that lunchtime.

"You don't need to worry," she said bitterly. "I don't

stand a chance now. The scholarship's yours if you need it so badly."

"Need it!" the girl drawled. "You surely don't think it's the *money*. It's the honour, of course. Once you're given the Lena Lane scholarship you're halfway to the top already. Not that I couldn't have got there without it . . ."

Polly snorted rudely and winked at Sara as she began to rattle away on her typewriter.

"Do you *have* to make that noise?" Nina complained.

"Some people've got work to do round here, if others haven't," Polly retorted.

"Good Lord, the last thing I want to do is interfere with one of the world's workers!" Nina said, sliding gracefully from the desk top and scattering cigarette ash around her. "Tell me," she asked Sara, "how did you make out up there?"

"Mrs. Lane said she'd be letting me know," Sara replied, wishing her answer didn't sound quite so feeble.

"She's obviously letting you down lightly," the other girl laughed. "That's the form for telling actresses when they've failed an audition. Or didn't you know?"

"And what did they tell you, Miss Knowall?" Polly demanded indignantly.

Nina looked supercilious. "It doesn't have to worry me. I don't have to have the scholarship to be able to take the course. As I said before, I only want it for the honour."

"I shouldn't have thought you needed the course at all," Polly said sarcastically.

"Well, I don't really," Nina assured her. "Aunt Lydia's helped me a lot already. But Mrs. Lane won't have any one on her agency books unless they've done the Lena Lane course."

The girl's air of confidence made Sara feel more hopeless than ever. She would have liked to ask Nina something about free-lance work, but was afraid of being sneered at, and anyway there was no opportunity, for the

other girl, glancing at the small gold watch on her slender wrist, ground out her cigarette and reached for her hat and gloves.

"If Aunt Lydia asks for me," she instructed Polly, "tell her I've gone to try on a dream of a cocktail dress I saw this morning and that I'll be back at her flat in time for cocktails."

As the door closed behind her, Polly poked out her tongue in disgust. "Stuck up piece! What wouldn't I give to see her end up a permanent in wholesale. That means a permanent model in a wholesale house," she explained to Sara. "No chance of that, worse luck. She's bound straight for the top, that one, and heaven help anyone who tries to stop her."

"She's very lovely," Sara said, trying hard to be fair.

"Yes, and doesn't she know it! But what about you?" Polly asked. "Will we be seeing you in the course?"

Sara shook her head. Now she had actually met her rival, face to face her last hope had vanished. "Not a chance," she assured Polly.

"Never mind. You'll get there somehow."

"I wish I could be so sure." Sara looked at the clock. She would just be in time to catch the four-twenty train back to Frimpton. "Goodbye, Polly," she said sadly, "and thanks for everything."

"Any time," Polly said, and Sara realised she meant it.

With dragging footsteps she left the shabby square which, for her, had become an Eden from which she was barred, all her bright hopes shattered. The only thing now was to write to the other two model schools and ask for her name to be put on the waiting list. It was either that, or asking her parents for the extra money, and this Sara knew she could never do.

Handing in her ticket to the collector she could already feel the dusty walls of Mr. Dunn's office closing around her, and when she reached home to be met by Tony minc-

ing his way up the garden path with a book balanced on his head, it was all she could do not to break down and howl.

"Very funny," she remarked and tried to push past him. At that moment her one thought was to rush upstairs and lock herself in her room before her mother could start to ask her questions. Her foot was on the bottom stair when her mother came out from the kitchen.

"This is for you," she said and handed Sara an orange-coloured envelope.

"For me?" Sara took it and stared at it. Whoever could be sending her a telegram? Quickly she opened it and the words danced before her eyes. As her blurred vision re-focused, she read the words aloud:

"Congratulations to our new scholarship winner. Letter follows. Lena Lane."

"Gosh," she exclaimed. "I've got it! I've got it!"

She clasped her mother round the waist and began dancing up and down the hall.

"You've got a model girl in the family now. What do you think of that?"

CHAPTER IV

ON Sara's first morning at the Lena Lane Model School she made such a point of being on time that she was the first student to arrive.

"How does it feel to be a Londoner?" Polly Wilson greeted her cheerfully when she put her head round her door.

"It feels wonderful," she told Polly gaily. "I keep pinching myself to make sure I'm really here."

Indeed, it was still difficult to believe, for even the news that she had won the scholarship had not obliterated all the other difficulties. Mrs. Gay's attitude had changed completely when she heard her daughter would be expected to stay in London while on the course. And when Sara explained that if she became a model she would have to move up to London anyway to be on the spot for work, her parents' immediate reaction had been that she was far too young as yet to think of living away from home. Sara had begged and pleaded to no avail until she had suddenly hit on the idea of writing to Mrs. Lane for advice. To her joy, the Principal had quickly written back to Sara's parents suggesting they get in touch with a hostel within easy distance of the Lena Lane School. She had personal knowledge of both Superintendent and Matron, she wrote, and many of her pupils whose homes were outside London

had been able to find comfortable accommodation there.

Fortunately the Superintendent wrote back to say they had a vacancy, and after Mrs. Gay had made a special trip to London with Sara and been shown over the hostel, including the bright, airy dormitory which Sara would share with five other girls, she had felt sufficiently reassured to withdraw her objections.

Sara had travelled up to London on Sunday evening, and had an early night in order to be at her best the following morning. It was her first time away from home and once the initial excitement had subsided, she felt horribly lost and tearful before at last drifting off to sleep in the cosy cretonne-hung cubicle with its white wood furniture. But when she awoke the next morning to join in the scramble for the bathroom and grab a hasty breakfast in the hostel dining-room she had been too thrilled by the thought of the day in front of her to have any time for homesickness.

There were voices from the hall as the rest of the girls began to assemble, and Polly suggested it was high time Sara went to join them. In a few minutes Lydia Durack appeared with a list of names which she proceeded to check off against each new arrival. When she came to Sara's she looked up.

"I see we have our star pupil with us," she said and from her tone of voice Sara realised Mme. Durack was out to make trouble for her. Some of the sunshine seemed to go out of the morning and the feeling of homesickness returned.

However, after that one comment, Lydia Durack paid her no more attention than any of the other girls, no more, in fact, than she paid to Nina who wasn't, it seemed to Sara, too pleased at being treated by her aunt as just another pupil. Watching Nina Durack, Sara was conscious how the girl stood out from among the rest of the class and more than ever she was amazed to think she had been con-

sidered good enough to win the scholarship in competition with such a formidable rival. As for the rest of the girls, they were quite a surprise, for they were far less glamorous than she had expected. "Why," she thought, "you can see far prettier and better dressed girls around Frimpton any day of the week!"

When all the names on her list were ticked off, Lydia Durack led the girls to the studio on the first floor. This was a large, bare room with high windows looking out over a narrow yard. Wooden chairs were grouped against the far wall behind which lay a dressing-room where they were told they should leave their things. A platform in the shape of an "L" with two lots of stairs leading up to it occupied the other half of the floor. There was a wall mirror behind the platform on one side, while on the other side was a table for the instructor.

Coming out of the dressing-room and taking their places on the wooden chairs they saw that Mme. Durack had been joined by Mrs. Lane, who welcomed them to the school and then asked each one to walk across the room, mount the platform and cross it to come down again on the far side. This, she said, was to help her fit the names to the faces.

Nearly all the girls wore high-heeled shoes but few of them seemed really used to wearing them, and all with the exception of Nina Durack and a beautiful slant-eyed girl called "Honey" Wei, who moved with the delicate grace of a cat—seemed to make the most dreadful clatter as they stepped up on the platform. When it came to her turn Sara could not help wondering how she must sound to the others; however, everyone made a more or less successful round, except for a lumpy girl with a round face called Marion Richards, who tripped coming down from the platform and had to be helped back to her seat, limping from a twisted ankle.

"What on earth is *she* doing in the class?" Sara won-

dered, for the girl was as plain as a boot and a size fourteen at least.

When they were all back in their places, the two Principals came round to the front of the platform which, so Mrs. Lane told them, was always known as the "cat-walk". Suggesting they grouped their chairs more closely around her she soon had them at their ease as she talked of the many things they would be studying during their time at the school.

There were a great many more things for them to learn than how to walk gracefully and display clothes and furs. Each morning they would start with a P.T. session and then go on to improve their walk and posture; the course would also include the use of make-up, advice from a physiotherapist, a hair stylist, a beautician, a corsetière, talks on dietetics, hygiene, voice production and social etiquette. There would also be outside visits to art galleries, fashion houses, photographic studios, theatres, textile manufacturers, T.V. studios, design schools and a scent factory. Some of them, Mrs. Lane said, might think these things had very little to do with being a model, but a model's job was not merely to act as a clothes horse, but to display them in the very best way possible—and this could only be done by a girl who was sure of herself and had confidence in her own judgement.

They were still asking questions when the bell went for mid-morning break and they trooped down to the basement where coffee was served. Another group of students were already jostling each other at the serving table and Sara gave an exclamation of surprise.

"Is there another class here too?"

"That's the charm school lot," Nina said superciliously.

"What on earth's that?" someone else asked.

"A shorter course for girls who just want to improve their posture and general grooming," Nina informed them loftily.

"That explains it," a third girl remarked. "I didn't think they looked like future models. Some of them are quite fat."

"They're not the only ones," Nina said and stared pointedly at Marion Richards, who flushed scarlet and turned away.

As they drank their coffee the girls began to chat together, diffidently at first and then with a growing eagerness to exchange ideas. The girls were all of such different types and from such varying backgrounds that it was difficult to judge their ages. There was Anne Slater who, with her straight brown hair looked about fifteen and turned out to be nearly twenty, while a somewhat sulky-looking girl called Jean Evans who looked at least twenty-one, was only seventeen. But then Jean had left school at fifteen to work as a packer in a big London store, whereas Anne had gone straight from boarding school to a College of Art. Sylvie Jones, a swarthy girl wearing black stockings and "winkle-picker" shoes had been a junior assistant in a wholesale coat manufacturers, Elspeth Grant had read French Literature at the Sorbonne, Diana Spencer Waugh was a debutante and "Honey" Wei's father was a wealthy Singapore merchant.

Anne Slater turned to Sara who happened to be standing next to her.

"Wasn't it awful," she said, "having to walk around on that platform with everyone staring at us? I thought I'd die!"

Everyone agreed with Anne except Jean Evans. "But that's what we'll have to do every day of our lives from now on. Walk around with everyone staring at us!"

A gasp went up as if this was the first time some of the girls had realised what their new profession involved.

"Don't you believe it," Sylvie Jones scoffed. "It's not *you* they're interested in, it's the clothes they want to look at."

Nina Durack looked the last speaker over contemptuously. "What on earth would you know about it?"

"More than you," Sylvie said, squaring up to Nina resolutely.

Nina shrugged and looked at Diana Spencer Waugh. "Honestly, the types one has to mix with these days . . . I do think Mrs. Lane might show more discrimination."

"Look here, who do you think you are . . .?" Sylvie began, but Jean Evans dragged her away before there could be any trouble.

Meanwhile, Anne was talking to Elspeth Grant. "So then I decided if I wasn't good enough to design clothes, at least I had the figure to model them. What about you?"

"Well, when I was at the Sorbonne I was taken to see a Paris collection," Elspeth said in her soft Highland accent, "and from that moment on, teaching just didn't stand a chance."

"I expect you want to go back to Paris, don't you?" Sara asked. "I've read they're awfully keen on English models over there."

"English!" exclaimed the Scottish girl in disgust. "Who's English?" She grinned. "As a matter of fact, they don't have model schools over there, so it's sink or swim for French girls who want to go in for modelling, unless they come here for training. I expect that's one reason English models are in such demand."

"Anyway," Anne told her, "being able to speak French ought to be a great help when it comes to getting a job in a leading fashion house. Gosh, I wish I was good at languages."

"A model has to know an awful lot about an awful lot of things," Sara said, "if she's really going to get anywhere."

"But isn't it worth it?" Elspeth asked, and Sara realised that here was one girl who shared her own enthusiasm.

By the time the bell went to summon them back to the studio, definite patterns of friendship had already begun

to show themselves. Nina, having decided Diana Spencer Waugh was the one girl worth knowing, had manoeuvred her into a corner and was busy holding forth on her views about things in general, while Jean and Sylvie were discussing their mutual experiences in the "Rag Trade", the professional name for the fashion business. Honey Wei, the Chinese girl was talking ballet with an ex-dancer, and several other girls were listening avidly. It was only as they made their way out of the rest room and up the badly lit staircase that Sara caught sight of Marion Richards straggling at the rear and realised a little guiltily that no one yet had heard a word from her or, for that matter, thought to bring her into the conversation. But then there was only one thing they were all burning to ask her: *How did you ever get accepted?* And that was a question not even Nina Durack had enough nerve to ask outright.

They reached the studio to find Lydia Durack in charge. "So *she's* to be our instructor," Sara thought, her worst fears realised, and at once began to grow anxious. However her anxiety was groundless, for the moment at least, for Lydia Durack was willing to leave her in peace.

The rest of the morning was spent in learning to walk properly, since walking, as Mme. Durack said, was as important to a model as breathing to a singer.

Each girl in turn had to cross to the door of the dressing-room so that she could advance into the studio as if making her entrance at a show. From there she was asked to walk down the middle of the studio, make a half turn, move her skirt with one hand as if calling attention to some special point, mount the cat-walk and parade up and down it before returning to the changing room.

One of the girls to make the quickest progress was the ex-dancer, and Lydia Durack told them that ballet dancing was always a good apprenticeship for a model girl.

However, by the end of the morning they were all beginning to move with greater assurance. They had

learnt to hold their shoulders relaxed but straight, to keep their behinds well tucked in and to cope with the stairs without wanting to look down at their feet. Even Marion Richards at last managed to make one complete round without stumbling or forgetting the direction she was meant to be going in, although her movements remained stiff and jerky and all admonitions to relax had precisely the opposite effect on her.

"No, no," Lydia Durack called impatiently, as Marion hurried thankfully back to the dressing-room. "You mustn't scuttle back like a crab to its shell! Come back and make your exit again. And do remember to drop your shoulders. Otherwise you'll look as if you have no neck."

She held her own shoulders in exaggerated imitation of Marion's hunched posture and the class giggled unkindly. "Relax, girl," she called, "you must learn to relax." She threw up her hands, and shook her head despairingly. "You walk like a clockwork toy. For goodness sake sit down!"

Next in turn was Sara. Waiting by the dressing-room door for the opportunity to make her entrance, she could not help feeling sorry for Marion, even while reflecting that she must be very conceited even to consider that she stood the faintest chance of becoming a model.

But as Marion drew level with her, Sara was surprised to see tears in her eyes and even more surprised to hear her mutter:

"I hate it! I hate it!"

Impulsively, Sara touched her hand. "Why do it then?" she whispered.

"I haven't any choice," Marion muttered and clung to Sara's hand for comfort.

"Sara!" Mme. Durack called impatiently. "We haven't got all day while you stand gossiping."

Realising the rest of the class was being held up, Sara pulled her hand away from Marion's grasp and hurried out into the studio, her curiosity considerably aroused.

CHAPTER V

BREAKFAST and supper were provided at the hostel but not a midday meal, so Sara was pleased when Elspeth and Anne asked her to join them for lunch. They made for a popular teashop near Victoria Station and over the meal Anne asked her what Lydia Durack had meant by her remark about "our star pupil". Rather embarrassed, Sara told them about being awarded the Lena Lane scholarship.

"Every time I look at Nina," she admitted, "I just can't imagine how I came to win it."

"I can," Elspeth said decidedly. "Although Nina's tremendously elegant, you're much more alive-looking and natural—that's what people are going for these days."

"Whatever the reason," Anne said, "I'm awfully glad Nina didn't get it. She's stuck up enough as it is."

"She makes me feel all arms and legs," Sara confessed.

"She makes *me* feel sick," Anne said. "Did you see her sucking up to that snooty Diana?"

"I don't think Diana's snooty," Elspeth answered. "I think she's rather nice."

"She's certainly got the looks and the figure to succeed," Sara agreed.

"That's more than anyone can say for Marion," Anne put in. "Gosh, that one's a real dead loss!"

"I can't help feeling sorry for her though," Sara said, and told them of Marion's outburst in the dressing-room.

"Oh, you're too soft-hearted," Anne said impatiently. "People should know their limitations and not try and push themselves where they don't belong. A girl as clumsy as that can hold up a whole class." She dug her fork into a cream bun and watched the cream spurt out. "Mrs. Lane must be round the bend if she thinks Marion Richards will ever make a model."

"And you must be round the bend if you think you can wolf cream buns," Elspeth said, making a wry face as she sipped unenthusiastically at her unsweetened coffee.

"Why not? I never put on weight."

"Nor me," Sara said.

"Well, you're both lucky then," Elspeth retorted. "I have to be really careful or my hips would be forty in no time. And I love sweet things."

Anne began to giggle. "Maybe Marion's going to model in those before and after ads. *This is how I looked before I took Dr. Poppycock's purple pills . . . !*"

They left the café still speculating rather unkindly about Marion and on the way back ran into Sylvie and Jean. As they turned the corner into the square they saw a shiny limousine pull up outside the school. A liveried chauffeur sprang out to hold open the door and a girl got out and scurried up the steps.

"Golly," said Anne, "did you see who that was? Our one and only Marion!"

"What do you think she is?" Jean asked intrigued. "A princess in disguise?"

"Some princess," Elspeth laughed. "The goosegirl would be more like it."

"Anyway," Anne said shrewdly, "we at least know how she got in here."

"What do you mean?" Sara asked.

Anne shrugged. "Money, of course. What else do you

think would have persuaded Mrs. Lane to take her?"

Sara would have liked to say something in Marion's defence but Anne made it sound so convincing that it was difficult to argue with her. It seemed hard on Marion though to be disliked just because she was plain and awkward. And no one could *help* having rich parents!

They were still speculating about Marion as they crowded into the cloakroom and, to their embarrassment, found the girl making up her face at the glass over the washbasins. Hastily, the girls began to talk of other things.

The cloakroom was small and the mirrors badly placed and there was a great deal of jostling for positions as they hurried to wash their hands and run a comb through their hair.

"Come on, move over," Sylvie said impatiently, giving Marion a friendly shove. "Anyone would think you'd bought the place."

It was harmlessly meant and, in fact, the sort of remark a girl like Sylvie would make quite unthinkingly to anyone.

But Marion took it badly and shoved back petulantly: "I've as much right here as you have."

"That's what you think."

Jean gave a contemptuous sniff. "Leave her alone, Sylvie. Marion's sort think they can buy their way in anywhere." It had taken Jean Evans more than a year of hard saving to be able to afford the Lena Lane school and she found it difficult not to resent girls like Marion and Diana.

"Oh, get out of my way," Marion flared and elbowing Sylvie aside, pushed her way out of the cloakroom.

"What have you to say now?" Anne challenged Sara. "Still want to stick up for her?"

Sara shook her head, unable to think up a convincing defence.

Back in the studio a surprise was waiting for the class. The girls who had qualified from the previous course

were staging a fashion show that afternoon for the benefit of the new students. The official "Passing Out" parade given before the Directors and the parents and friends of the students had been held the previous Friday, and this was an additional show to help give the newly qualified models added confidence before starting out on their own. Also, it encouraged the first-week students to see the standard for which they could aim.

Mrs. Lane was already installed in the place of honour and with her was Katie Talbot, the ex-model who ran the Agency side of the school. The rest of the audience consisted of both the model girl and charm school students, while Lydia Durack was in charge of the microphone and announced each girl as she made her entrance. There were ten girls in the show and each one was allowed to model a suit or two-piece, a cocktail dress and beachwear, all of their own choosing.

Watching these poised, elegant creatures drifting and circling in front of them, while soft music provided a dreamy background, it seemed impossible to believe that only three weeks earlier they had been raw, ungroomed material like the girls who made up their audience. Some of the new models might already have been displaying clothes for years to judge by their poise and the assurance with which they drew attention to the cut of a skirt or the detail of a collar. Not one of them gave evidence of nerves or stage-fright. "Could that be *me* in three short weeks?" the watching model students asked themselves with wonder.

"Not a bad turn out," Nina whispered to Diana.

"I think they're absolutely wonderful," Diana replied.

"There's nothing to it," Nina assured her grandly. "None of this lot are perfect anyway."

"How do you know?"

"Aunt Lydia told me. At the real Passing Out last week," she explained, "the Directors act as judges and

fault any girl who isn't quite perfect. Everyone starts off with a hundred points and you get marked down for anything you do wrong. They're frightfully strict. Fifty is the passing-out mark—which means you get taken on the Agency books—and seventy-five is considered high." She sighed longingly. "If you get more than ninety you're in the running for the Lena Lane gold medal. You've heard of Harriet Vane, haven't you, the one who's always being photographed for 'Dress'? Well, she won the gold medal three years ago. And Jane Allen, who was top model at Tarquin before she married Lord Seymour, was another winner."

"Wouldn't it be absolutely smashing if you were to win it?" Diana said enthusiastically, which was exactly what Nina most wanted to hear.

While they had been talking, the last of the cocktail dresses had been shown, and now the first girl came on again, this time wearing a swim suit. Most of the others had played for safety and modelled loose play shirts over short shorts, but one girl came through from the dressing-room wearing the briefest of bikinis and a gasp went up from the audience.

"I'd never dare," Jean whispered to Sara.

"Why not? I think she looks terrific." Sara was already wondering what *she'd* choose to wear for her own Passing Out: the white swim suit in which she had won the beauty contest, or a new dance dress. "Anyway," she went on, "you'd wear one on the beach and think nothing of it."

"That's different," Anne whispered back.

"It's not different at all," Sara said vehemently. She must have spoken louder than she realised for several heads turned towards her.

Lydia Durack looked in her direction. "Since you are not interested in the show, perhaps you had better leave."

"But I..."

Mme. Durack's cold glare silenced her and Sara stood

up. If only Mrs. Lane would come to her rescue! But the Principal's vision was cut off by a mass of intervening heads. Besides, even if Mrs. Lane had overheard the quick exchange it was unthinkable that she would countermand her assistant's orders in public.

With her head high and cheeks flaming, Sara left the room in disgrace.

"I loathe Lydia Durack," she said to herself. "And worse than that—Lydia Durack loathes me!"

CHAPTER VI

SARA walked into the studio the next morning prepared for trouble, but to her surprise Mme. Durack greeted her calmly with no mention of the unpleasantness of the previous afternoon. Thankfully, she went through to the dressing-room to change into the shorts and top which they had been asked to bring that morning for P.T.

To everyone's surprise this physical training bore little resemblance to the classes they remembered from school, for it consisted of a series of graceful, rhythmic movements performed to music. These movements, Mme. Durack told them, had been designed especially to combat the fatigue imposed by the physical demands of modelling.

After P.T. there came a visit from the physiotherapist, a brisk young woman whose function was to advise on individual figure requirements. She was able to show each girl exactly how to hold herself to impose the minimum of muscular strain on the job and, when it came to advising on the correction of figure faults, her training enabled her to tell immediately which was fat and which was muscle. Elspeth and Jean Evans were shown the right exercises to reduce their hips, Sylvie was shown how she would be able to take two inches from around her waist, while Anne and Diana Spencer Waugh were given special exercises to increase their bust measurement. Sara was gratified to find herself classified, with Nina and the Chinese girl, as "figure

perfect", unlike poor Marion Richards who left with a long list of exercises designed to modify almost every inch of her from head to toe. Finally, the class was shown a few simple toning up exercises by which to keep themselves generally fit and trim, and when the bell went for break, everyone went down to coffee practising waist bends!

The second half of the morning was devoted to further instruction in walking. This time Mme. Durack took it a stage further, demonstrating the correct way of modelling a dress and jacket. It was a lot more difficult than it looked to master the trick of sliding smoothly and easily out of a jacket while simultaneously walking and turning and time after time the girls were made to start all over again before their instructor pronounced herself satisfied with their performance. Sara was stopped twice for sticking out her chest and allowing the jacket to trail too low on the floor, and even Nina did not escape reproof for hunching her shoulders and descending the cat-walk on the side of the steps instead of dead centre.

Everyone was feeling heartily sick of this particular exercise by the time Mme. Durack decided they had had enough for one day, and said they would end the morning by learning to make a court curtsy. Here Diana scored, having already learnt this at her finishing school, and she was called in front of the class to demonstrate her straight back and neatly tucked-in tail to the line of wobbling girls.

Massaging their aching thighs they were at last released to stagger off to a well-earned lunch, and everyone was delighted to remember that the afternoon session was given over to a talk and demonstration by a beauty consultant.

"My legs are so stiff I couldn't even *crawl* up on that wretched cat-walk," Elspeth sighed wearily.

"Well, you don't have to," Sara reminded her. "This afternoon you just have to sit still and learn how to look beautiful."

Anne got out her compact and, peering in the small mirror, began to dab powder on her shiny nose. "If anyone can show me how to make powder stick on my face for more than five minutes at a time, I'll be forever grateful!"

Sara laughed. "If you can't keep it on now, what do you think you're going to do when you're modelling winter coats in mid-July?"

"When I'm what?" Anne demanded in horror.

"That's when you'll be showing them," Sara promised her with amusement. "Didn't you know?"

Anne shook her head and Sara giggled.

"Fur coats in July and beach dresses in January," she enumerated. "That's life for a model girl."

"But it doesn't make sense!"

"Oh yes it does. The designers have to have their collections ready months in advance. That's the only way the clothes can be copied from them and put in the cheaper shops at the right time."

Having read all about this side of a model's work in the books she had taken from the library, Sara felt quite an authority on the subject.

"Oh well," Anne said decidedly, "if that's the way it is, then here's one model who's definitely going to go in for photographic work. I've no intention of sweating in sable during August or catching bronchitis in a bikini in January!"

"Photography's just as bad," Sara went on ruthlessly. "Magazines always work ages in advance, just like dress houses. Isn't that right, Elspeth?"

"Quite right. Photographs you see in magazines in December have most likely been taken as long ago as September."

"It sounds just like *Alice in Wonderland* to me," Anne said disgustedly.

"You mean the Mad Hatter," Sara giggled.

"That's just about how I feel," Anne said gloomily, "posing in an Easter Bonnet at Christmas!"

When they returned to the studio after lunch they found the dressing-room crowded with girls experimenting with make-up.

Sylvie Jones had given herself the full "doe-eyed" treatment which contrasted startlingly with her pale lips, while Jean was slashing lipstick on her prettily shaped mouth until it resembled a gaping wound.

"No one can show *me* how to use powder and paint," Jean said. "I've been using it for years."

"We'd been walking for years too," Anne pointed out, "but look how badly we did it."

Jean's answer was cut short by the entry of Mme. Durack and the beautician.

"What on earth have you stupid children been doing to yourselves?" she exclaimed in disgust.

She pushed Jean and Sylvie towards the washbasin but the beautician begged that they should be allowed to remain as they were.

Eyes twinkling, she looked them up and down. "You're the most wonderful illustration of how *not* to use make-up!" she exclaimed. "Now come closer all you others, and I'll explain why."

By the end of the afternoon each girl knew a great deal more about the art of make-up in general and her own special beauty problems in particular. They learnt that different skins needed different creams, and each of them was advised on the correct cosmetic range for her particular type and colouring. Models these days, they were told, were expected to have a fresh, natural look, not an artificial one, and for that, the best make-up was the unobtrusive sort.

Elspeth nudged Sara. "Remember? Wasn't that just what I was telling you?"

Large jars of cold cream and tissues and astringent

lotion were then produced and the girls were told to clean their faces preparatory to the most exciting part of the afternoon: the practical demonstration in which each girl was shown the correct method of applying make-up, and the best way to bring out her own good points and disguise her bad ones.

When the lecturer had gone, all the girls crowded around the mirrors in the dressing-room studying their new faces.

"No wonder my make-up would never stay on," Anne exclaimed. "To think that all this time I've been using the wrong sort of foundation."

"So was I," Diana Spencer Waugh said. "And the wrong eye shadow too. This blue with my hair is quite devastating, isn't it?"

"Devastating!" Sara laughed. In spite of her debutante affectations, Diana was a pleasant girl once you saw her alone, away from Nina.

At that moment Nina chose to stroll in from the studio in search of her friend, and her smile disappeared as she saw Diana talking so animatedly to Sara.

"Oh, there you are," she exclaimed. "I've been waiting for you. I thought we'd arranged to go to Bond Street for tea."

"Had we? How dreadfully boring of me not to remember. But we've just been having the most madly interesting chat about eye-shadow."

"You'd think no one had ever *seen* a foundation cream before today," Nina said contemptuously. "Frankly, I could hardly stop yawning, it was so elementary."

"Maybe for you, sweetie," Diana drawled, taking off Nina's supercilious manner to perfection, "but for all us dim peasant types it was quite wildly advanced stuff." Deadpan, she winked across at the other girls who had to turn away to hide their laughter.

Unfortunately, Diana had forgotten the mirrors through

which Nina caught the reflection of her conspiratorial wink quite plainly.

At that moment Marion, who up till then had not addressed a word to anyone, chose to enter the conversation. "Well, I found it marvellous," she announced. "It taught me a lot that's going to be very helpful."

Infuriated at what she considered Diana's betrayal, Nina swung round on the last speaker. "It did!" she sneered. "The only thing that would help you is plastic surgery! And that's something they don't provide at the Lena Lane School."

Despite the way most of the class felt about Marion, no one except Nina could have been spiteful enough to say such a thing to her face.

Marion turned white with temper and lunged forward. "Someone's going to need plastic surgery round here," she promised chokingly, "but it's not going to be me."

Her sharp nails pointed towards Nina's face and Sara, who was nearest to Marion pushed against her with all her weight. With a cry of pain Marion fell against the wall and Nina backed away.

"You could have scarred my face," she gasped. "You're mad! Mad!"

With a whimper, Marion staggered to her feet and ran from the studio, leaving the rest of the girls to stare at one another in horror.

"You've only got yourself to blame," Sara said with scorn. "You had no right to say such a dreadful thing to the poor girl."

"Poor girl, indeed! She might have disfigured me for life."

"If she had, you'd have deserved it!"

"Is that so?" Nina sneered. "I suppose you've never said anything in a temper, have you?"

"Do be quiet, Nina," Diana protested. "If it hadn't been for Sara, you'd be feeling much more sorry for yourself."

Realising that feeling was against her, Nina turned ungraciously to say thank you to Sara, but Sara had already slipped from the room and was running down to the cloak-room.

Marion was huddled in a limp heap at the bottom of the basement stairs and as Sara spoke her name she started to sob. Sitting down on the step next to her she wisely let the girl cry herself out. Waiting there in the half darkness she heard the rest of the class go clattering down the stairs and out of the front door and was just thinking, rather perversely since she had not let anyone know her intention of finding Marion, "They might at least have seen if they could help me," when a figure appeared at the top of the basement stairs. It was Elspeth come back to look for her. Quickly Sara went up to meet her.

"I'm with Marion," she whispered. "I don't want to leave her."

"I guessed you'd be here with her when we saw that great car outside still."

"Oh good, I wondered if it would be there. If you tell the driver she's been held up, I'll get her out to it as soon as I can."

Elspeth looked at her watch with a worried frown. "Anne had to go off to keep a dentist's appointment and I've arranged to meet my mother, otherwise I'd stop with you. Will you be all right on your own?"

"Perfectly. She's quiet now, but seeing someone else will probably only start her off again. Go on," she urged, as Elspeth still hesitated, "if you don't turn up on time, your mother will start worrying."

Leaving Elspeth to deal with the chauffeur, Sara returned to Marion who by now had stopped crying and was scrubbing at her eyes with a damp handkerchief.

Sara surveyed her critically. "You're going to make your eyes awfully sore if you do that." She reached for a

clean handkerchief of her own and pressed it in Marion's hand. "Here, take this. It's quite clean."

"I'm so ashamed," Marion sniffed miserably.

"You don't have to be," Sara said briskly, "I don't like Nina any more than you do."

"Yes, but you don't go attacking people with your nails. It's so—so primitive!"

"So is being rude, and Nina was certainly *that*!" Sara looked at Marion curiously. "I don't want to pry or anything, but do you often lose your temper so badly?"

Marion hesitated, her mouth working nervously. "Once I did. At school. I threw a stone at one of the girls and she had to have three stitches in her forehead."

"Golly! How awful for you."

"Everyone seemed to think it was awful of me. I hated myself afterwards, but by then it was too late."

"You'd have hated yourself just as much if you'd hurt Nina."

"I expect I would. Afterwards. But at the time I don't seem to think of anything."

"What happened? At school, I mean. Did you get expelled?"

"I wanted them to expel me but they didn't. I'm never sent away no matter what I do," Marion said. "That's the worst part."

Sara wondered if she had heard right. "I wouldn't be too sure this time," she said cautiously. "Nina is Mme. Durack's niece, and she's the last sort to keep quiet about a thing like this."

"I don't want her to keep quiet," Marion said. "I want to be asked to leave."

Sara was about to ask what she meant when Marion suddenly remembered the car waiting to take her home.

"Oh Lord! Bennet must have been waiting for hours."

"If Bennet's your chauffeur, yes, he has. But it's all right. Elspeth told him you'd been held up."

Marion looked at her. "Will you come back with me?"

"I don't think so. I've—"

"Why not? You were only going back to the hostel. I heard you tell the others. Please," Marion begged. "Mother isn't home this afternoon so I can have a proper talk with you. And I've just got to talk to someone. Please, Sara, don't make me go home alone."

Sara put her arm around the girl's shoulder, wondering why Marion should think it would bother her to have to meet her mother. "It's all right. Of course I'll come back with you," she said comfortingly. "As long as I can be back at the hostel by half-past six."

"I'll tell Bennet to run you back," Marion promised.

When the chauffeur saw the two girls coming down the steps he hurried to open the car door.

"What would the girls say if they could see me now!" Sara thought, sinking down on the beautifully sprung back seat and trying to look as if she had spent all her life riding in chauffeur-driven limousines.

"Sara," Marion asked suddenly. "You don't *have* to be back at the hostel every night by six-thirty do you?"

"No," Sara laughed, "but that's when they serve supper. If you're going to be out for a meal you have to let them know in advance."

"Why don't you live at home?"

"Because I come from Frimpton."

Sara launched into an account of her home and family and how she had come to enrol at the Lena Lane School. She was still talking when the car turned into a private road and pulled up in the carriageway of a large Queen Anne mansion. Marion got out her compact and tried to dab powder on her blotchy face. "Now I look a worse mess than ever," she commented wretchedly. She shrugged and, pushing the compact away again, looked at the door which Bennet was holding open for them.

“Is this really your home?” Sara asked in awe.

Marion scrambled from the car and glanced up at the imposing frontage of the house.

“I wouldn’t know about it being a home,” she said bitterly. “But this is where I live.”

CHAPTER VII

THE door was opened by a butler with the dignified bearing of a diplomat.

"Good afternoon, Miss Marion. Cook was just remarking how you were a little late returning."

"I was held up," Marion told him. Grandly she added, "Please tell Cook I have a friend to tea."

"I shall see the information is conveyed. Will you be taking tea in the drawing-room, Miss Marion, or in your suite?"

"I'll have it up in the nursery. And you can tell Cook that as I have a friend I want a decent tea for once."

Seizing Sara's hand she hurried her across what seemed like half a mile of black and gold mosaic floor and up the broad sweep of stairs—exactly the sort of staircase she had expected to find at the Lena Lane School—to the second floor where Marion had a self-contained suite; bedroom, bathroom and a sitting-room which she referred to as the nursery.

"Make yourself at home," she invited and threw open the door of her opulently furnished bedroom.

And what a bedroom it was! All ivory and gold and quilted satin, with a thick white carpet and pink-shaded lights.

"Oh," Sara gasped following her into the gleaming

green and black tiled bathroom. "It's exactly like you see on the films!"

"It's okay," Marion said grudgingly as she crossed to the basin and began to bathe her swollen eyelids. "I'd swop with you any day."

"That's what you say," Sara retorted uncomfortably.

Marion dabbed her eyes dry with a thick green bath-towel. "It's what I *mean*," she told her fiercely.

When the girls had washed and made-up again at the heart-shaped dressing-table with its triple mirror and crystal and gold toilet accessories, Marion led the way into the sitting-room she had referred to as the nursery. Unlike the bedroom this was furnished in contemporary fashion with bright coloured upholstery and curtains and low, Swedish-style furniture. One wall was given over to a built-in bookcase and another to a Hi-Fi installation and record cabinets.

As they sat down a middle-aged parlourmaid appeared with the tea tray, but in place of the sandwiches and cakes Sara had automatically expected there was only a little Ryvita thinly spread with butter and some dull looking digestive biscuits.

Her colour mounting, Marion watched the maid set down the tray on the table in front of the couch.

"Didn't Cook get my message?" she demanded. "I have a friend with me and I want a proper tea."

"I'm sorry, Miss Marion, but Cook says to tell you she has her orders from your mother and she can't go against them."

"All right," Marion said wearily. "It's not your fault, Mary."

When the maid had gone, Sara said uncomfortably: "Don't look so worried, old girl. I'm not a bit hungry."

The colour still flaring in her cheeks, Marion stalked over to the record cabinets and rummaging behind it brought out a carton of chocolate biscuits. "Emergency

supplies," she announced with a defensive laugh. "Mother wants me to diet so I'm not allowed to have anything fattening. But I fool her," she said triumphantly. "One of the other maids smuggles stuff in for me."

"But don't you think your mother might be right? About the dieting, I mean."

Even as she spoke, Sara wondered if she sounded dreadfully priggish.

"Whether I diet or not should be *my* business," Marion answered. "I'm not a baby. I don't like being forced to do things." She poured the tea and passed a cup to Sara. "I hope you don't take sugar because there isn't any. Only saccharine. I'm not trusted not to take sugar, you see, if it's sent up for my friend!"

"So that's why you smuggle in chocolate biscuits," Sara said, beginning to understand a little. "To get your own back on your mother."

"Oh, I know how stupid it sounds, but if people don't trust you, it only makes you *want* to be deceitful," Marion nibbled angrily at a piece of Ryvita. "Poor mother. She's so disappointed in having me for a daughter."

"That's an awful thing to say."

"It's true enough." All at once Marion began to cry again, "I can't help being me."

"Of course you can't. Why ever should you want to? Marion, please," Sara begged, "do stop it."

"I'm sorry," Marion gulped, "but sometimes I feel so miserable I could run away. It's awful having everyone hate you."

"But everyone doesn't hate you."

"Yes they do! None of the girls in the class like me."

"That's because they can't make out what you're doing there," Sara said awkwardly.

"It's Mother's idea," came the reply. "Not mine."

Sara hesitated. "But surely your mother can't seriously think you could be a model?"

"Originally I was just meant to take the charm school course in the hope it might make me less awkward and clumsy." Marion struck a pose, gying herself unkindly. "Some hope! But naturally, the charm school course wasn't good enough for Mother, not when she found out there was a bigger and better course going on simultaneously."

"But I thought it was impossible to enrol for the model course unless you stood a good chance of qualifying. How did your mother get Mrs. Lane to agree?"

"Father happens to be managing director of a company that has a lot of money invested in the House of Tarquin. And old Matthew Tarquin is chairman of the board of directors of the Lena Lane School. Simple when you know how, isn't it?" Marion finished bitterly.

Not knowing what to say, Sara squeezed the plump shoulder sympathetically.

"You know, you're the prettiest girl in the class," Marion told Sara, "and you're the only one who's taken any trouble to be nice to me."

"I haven't been very nice," Sara said regretfully, and blushed at the compliment as she thought of all the unkind remarks she had listened to the girls making about Marion.

"Nicer than the rest, anyway," Marion said. "It's all right, you don't have to look embarrassed. I'm pretty used to being disliked. It was the same at school. I wasn't much good at acting, but I always used to enjoy the end of term play. I didn't mind what I did, costumes, stage managing, shifting the scenery even. But that wasn't good enough for Mother. She wanted to see her daughter have the lead, so she got Father to donate a swimming pool or something, and there I was trying to play Ophelia when I'd have done better as one of the gravediggers!"

"But surely your father—?"

"You can't blame him," Marion said quickly. "You see I had a younger sister who died of polio when she was

eleven. Eva was everything I could never hope to be; slim and pretty and gay. Mother adored her of course, and if Eva had lived I don't suppose she'd have bothered this way about me."

"And now she wants you to be a substitute Eva?"

"Yes. She wants me to wear pretty clothes and go to lots of parties with loads of men!"

"But that's what everyone wants."

"Well, I don't. I hate parties and clothes bore me. I expect that sounds crazy to you, but I can't help it. My idea of a wonderful time is to live on a farm and ride and fish and help look after the animals. What I'd really like to do is be a vet."

Sara stared at Marion in amazement. How could any girl *not* love beautiful clothes? The girl's ambitions were so different from her own that it was hard to feel as sympathetic as she would have liked. But what Sara knew already from her own experience was that if there was something you really wanted, it was no use sitting around waiting for it to come to you. You had to go out after it.

"Why don't you tell all this to your father?" she suggested.

"It wouldn't do any good. Father won't even let me so much as breathe a word yet because Mother throws a fit."

"But why should she do that?"

Marion looked confused. "Sara, can you keep a secret?"

"Of course. What is it?"

"Mother thinks it's just an idea I've got into my head since I met Frank." She coloured slightly, a warm glow quite different from the embarrassed red flush Sara had previously seen, staining her cheeks. "Why," Sara thought surprised, "if she didn't always look so unhappy, she'd really be quite pretty."

"Frank was the vet who looked after Dinky, my cocker spaniel, when she died last year," Marion went on breath-

lessly. "He was terribly kind, and so was Babs. That's Frank's sister who runs the pet shop."

"And is it because of Frank that you want to be a vet?" Sara asked.

"Of course not," Marion said impatiently. "You're as bad as Mother. I've *always* wanted to be a vet, well, ever since I was about ten. I could be too," she said with a confidence Sara had never seen in her before. "I'm good at science and my headmistress wanted me to go in for medicine. But I'd much rather be a vet because I like animals a lot more than I like people." She saw Sara's surprise and explained. "It's almost as difficult to be a vet as it is to be a doctor. More difficult really, because animals can't tell you how they're feeling the way people can. That's what's so unfair," she said hotly. "I'm sure if Frank was a doctor instead of a vet, Mother would never have made up her mind he was unsuitable for me."

"For *you*?" Sara gasped, taken off guard and too astonished to be polite. "Do you mean that you and Frank are . . ."

"Yes," Marion exclaimed, laughing. "I know I'm not pretty like you, but then Frank isn't very good-looking either. But we—we like each other, and that's what really matters. And he's so kind and so wonderful with animals. He's sure I could make a good vet. But Mother's stopped us seeing each other because she thinks he's a fortune hunter and can't be interested in *me*. It's not true, Sara. I'm positive . . . it isn't true!"

"I'm sure it isn't," Sara assured her indignantly. "But you'll have to learn to stand up for yourself or you're never going to get anywhere."

"I can't," Marion cried, suddenly sounding hopeless again. "I just can't go against Mother. You don't know what she's like."

Sara sighed. She liked Marion and she felt sorry for her, but it was difficult not to feel irritated by her spinelessness.

She was just about to remark that if Marion was not prepared to help herself, there was no-one else who could, when she heard a voice crying gaily: "Oh dear, and who is it this time, Mary? Not another of Miss Marions lame dogs, I hope."

"That's Mother!" Marion exclaimed, jumping nervously to her feet and hastily stuffing the chocolate biscuits out of sight behind a pile of magazines.

The door opened and a woman came in, but instead of the grim-visaged autocrat Sara had been expecting, she saw a slender, elegantly dressed creature in a cloud of blond mink and French perfume. She embraced Marion warmly, but the girl submitted without returning the kiss.

Mrs. Richards indicated the magnificent bunch of tea roses she was carrying. "I saw these, darling, and thought how perfect they'd look in your room." She held them out to her daughter. "See what a beautiful scent."

Marion sniffed at the flowers ungraciously. "Thank you, Mother, they're very nice. I'll tell Mary to put them in a vase."

"Wouldn't you like to arrange them yourself?"

"You know I'm no good at arranging flowers."

Mrs. Richards sighed and changed the subject quickly. "Aren't you going to introduce me to your friend?"

Marion did so, and the moment the older woman heard the name she gave an exclamation of pleasure.

"Why, you must be the girl who won the scholarship. You're every bit as lovely as Matthew Tarquin said you were!"

"Mr. Tarquin told you about me?" Sara asked in amazement.

"Certainly he did. Last week when I was there for a fitting."

"Mother gets most of her clothes from Tarquin," Marion told Sara.

"He made this for me last year," Mrs. Richards declared,

throwing aside her mink stole to allow Sara a closer look at the simple but exquisite dress and jacket she was wearing.

"It's lovely," Sara told her with genuine enthusiasm.

"I can see you already appreciate beautiful clothes. It would suit you, Sara. But then I should think nearly everything would suit you, wouldn't it?" Sara's cheeks burned and she did not know what to say. Fortunately Mrs. Richards did not wait, but continued to talk. "I keep trying to persuade Marion to choose some things from the next Collection but the silly child would far rather go out and get something ready-made." She tugged half-heartedly at the skirt of Marion's expensive but badly fitting grey jumper suit. "You really should have had some alterations made to this before taking it, you know."

Marion jerked her skirt out of her mother's grasp. "Don't fuss so, Mother. Anyway, you know I can't bear standing around having pins stuck into me. It's such a waste of time."

"You see what I have to put up with, Sara," Mrs. Richards appealed to her prettily. "I hope *you* don't share Marion's aversion to pins?"

"It wouldn't be much use wanting to be a model if I did," Sara laughed, trying not to show her embarrassment. She looked at her watch anxiously. "Marion, I'm awfully sorry, but it's after quarter past six. I must be leaving."

Marion explained to her mother that Sara had to be back at her hostel by six-thirty. "I told her Bennet would run her back. I hope it's all right."

"Of course, darling. But Sara must come over again. You will come, won't you, Sara?" She quickly consulted a small pocket diary which she took from her bag. "Tomorrow we go to the theatre, but Thursday's free and I'd love you to come to dinner. You can make all the arrangements with Marion."

"Thank you," Sara said, though from Marion's scowl

she had the feeling the girl was none too pleased. Still there seemed no way of getting out of the invitation.

"I'll see you out," Marion said quickly.

Downstairs in the hall, waiting for the car to be brought round, Marion said: You don't have to come on Thursday unless you want to."

"It's up to you," Sara told her. "Do *you* want me to come?"

"Does it matter what I want? It's Mother you're coming to see, isn't it? Congratulations, Sara," she sneered, "you made quite a hit with Mother."

"Well I certainly liked her," Sara said, suddenly feeling annoyed by Marion's disloyalty. "From the things you were telling me earlier I got the—I got the—"

"The impression that she was a dragon?" The girl laughed bitterly. "If she was, it would be easy to fight her!"

A car stopped at the entrance and Sara gave a sigh of relief.

"I must be going now. See you tomorrow."

"What? Oh yes. See you tomorrow." Marion waited until Sara was climbing into the car, then called out after her. "You wouldn't know, of course, but tea roses were always Eva's favourite flowers."

CHAPTER VIII

NEXT morning Sara woke late after a restless night of broken dreams in which Marion, brandishing a tea rose, had chased her mother through the endless corridors of a luxuriously equipped zoo in which all the animals had the faces of the Lena Lane staff and pupils.

Scrambling into her clothes, gulping down her breakfast and racing through the grey streets of Pimlico, Sara was only just in time to slip into her shorts before Lydia Durack strolled into the studio. Seeing the class swaying in the graceful movements of the P.T. exercises set Sara chuckling to herself as she recalled her dream in which Nina and Diana had featured as a pair of borzois, Sylvie and Jean as two well-intentioned monkeys and Mme. Durack as a magnificent but deadly jaguar crouched on the turn of the Adam staircase waiting to spring on an unseen victim.

Suddenly she shivered, realising something that had been obscure in the dream. It was she who had been the unseen victim!

As soon as the bell went for coffee she was seized on by Elspeth and Anne, both dying of curiosity to learn the outcome of her session with Marion.

"Did you get her to calm down?" Elspeth asked. "We both felt awful leaving you to cope on your own."

"I got a good look at the car when I passed the message on to the chauffeur," Anne said. "It looked smashing."

"It is," Sara laughed. "I got a ride in it. Two rides, in fact!"

"No! Not really? How?"

"I'll tell you about it later," Sara said, "if you promise me one thing. Try and be a bit nicer to Marion."

"That's all very well," Anne complained, but Elspeth cut her short.

"If Sara thinks we should be nicer to her, then we will be. And leave the questions till later."

"Thanks," Sara said. "I knew I could count on you. But I can tell you one thing now. The last thing Marion wants is to be a model. It's her mother who's pushed her into this."

Anne pouted. "She shouldn't let herself be pushed."

"That's what I thought. But it's more complicated than that." Sara broke off and looked around the coffee room. "Where is Marion? Oh dear, I suppose she's gone off on her own."

"I'm sure I saw her leave the studio ahead of us," Anne exclaimed, "and Nina isn't here either."

"If it's Nina you're looking for," Diana said drifting over to them, "I left her deep in conference with 'Auntie'."

"Dear me," Elspeth remarked mildly, "and there I was thinking you two were friends. How wrong can you be?"

"Too, too terribly wrong, sweetie," Diana assured her. "It takes two to make a friendship, which Nina didn't seem to appreciate. You wouldn't think it possible, would you, such a divine skin could be quite so devastatingly thick!"

"All the same," Sara said uneasily, "I think I'd better see if I can find where Marion's hidden herself."

"I believe I have the answer to that as well," Diana said nonchalantly. "I saw her disappearing into the dim regions of Polly's cubby-hole, and from the dark hints of vengeance Nina's been throwing out all morning, I'd say your

precious Marion could be on the carpet at this very minute! If you can call that piece of desiccated matting in the Big White Chief's sanctum a carpet!"

"I hope Mrs. Lane doesn't come down on her too heavily," Sara sighed, while the other two giggled disrespectfully at Diana's description of their dignified Principal.

"I don't believe you take anything seriously," Elspeth exclaimed accusingly to the young debutante.

"Darling, you're so terribly wrong," Diana assured her. "You've no conception how passionately interested I am in my work."

"Do you mean to go on with modelling when you leave here?" Sara asked, momentarily diverted from her anxiety over Marion.

Diana blew aside a lock of straight, fair hair which had flopped forward over one eye. "Poppet, how can you ask! Wild horses couldn't stop me. I mean, as I pointed out to Mummy and Daddy when they wanted to get pompous, it simply isn't enough these days just to get your name in those gossip columns as having been seen around at dozens of parties. You have to have a job to prove what a worthwhile citizen you really are. All my friends are holding down fabulously responsible jobs like making tea at the Foreign Office or helping out in someone's exotic coffee bar. But since none of that seemed my style, well, here I am."

"Sometimes," Elspeth remarked when their laughter had died down, "I begin to doubt whether anyone, even a deb, could be quite such a bird-brain as you want us to think *you* are!"

"Which only goes to prove how few debbs you can have known, sweetie," Diana commented sadly.

On the way up from coffee Sara ran into Marion coming out of Polly's office. Having expected to find her in tears Sara was surprised when Marion cried happily, "Mrs. Lane's a real darling. No-one could have been kinder or

more understanding. Mme Durack went straight to her this morning, but I don't think Mrs. Lane pays an awful lot of attention to anything she says."

"That wouldn't surprise me," said Sara, who had already sensed hidden antagonisms between Mrs. Lane and her deputy. "Anyway, let me guess. You're not going on with the course. Is that what you want to tell me?"

"Not quite. But from tomorrow I'm to be allowed to do the practical work with the charm school course, where I won't feel so out of it, and just take the theoretical side with you model school types. Why, Sara, what's the matter? You look as if you don't think it such a good idea."

"It's not that. I was just wondering what you were going to tell your mother?"

"Why, nothing. Why should I?"

"I don't know. It's only that it sounds a bit deceitful."

"Whose side are you on, anyway?" Marion cried reproachfully.

"Yours, of course," Sara told her with a quick smile, but even as she said it, she could not help feeling it was rather too underhand for her liking, and she could foresee all sorts of complications if Mrs. Richards chanced to ask her any questions regarding Marion's progress. However there was no time to argue about it now, not unless they wanted Mme. Durack coming down on them for arriving late back from coffee.

But they *were* late, and the class was already in session when they walked into the studio. Lydia Durack, who was on the platform illustrating the various methods of displaying a stole, broke off her demonstration as they tried to tip-toe quietly to their seats.

"Come back here, both of you! Do you think you know so much already that you do not need to be on time for your classes?"

"I'm dreadfully sorry," Marion blurted out, "but Mrs. Lane sent for me."

"So? In that case I hope we may now expect some more restrained behaviour from you. Well, don't stand there, girl, go to your place. And you, Sara?" she demanded icily, when Marion had scuttled thankfully out of reach of her waspish tongue. "Have *you* had time to think up an equally good excuse?"

Sara shook her head dumbly. She realised there was nothing she could effectively say in her own defence and would have liked to kick herself hard for her stupidity in giving this woman yet another chance to get her knife into her.

"No excuse at all? Dear, dear!" Lydia Durack smiled her thin-lipped smile, enjoying every moment of the inquisition. "In that case," she decreed, "there is only one way I can think of to deal with constitutional unpunctuality such as yours. No coffee break for you tomorrow. Instead, we shall have to see if we cannot think up some more useful way of employing that time."

Her thrust delivered, she turned back to continue her demonstration and Sara, her cheeks scarlet with indignation, walked to her seat with the eyes of the class on her. What a horrible woman! Childishly she thought of all the tortures she would like to inflict on her.

"Sara! Sara Gay!"

Absorbed in her thoughts, Sara failed at first to hear her name being called.

"Sara, pay attention! Take this stole and show the class how you would model it."

With a start of horror, Sara took the stole as commanded and crossed to the dressing-room clutching it to her. She had been so deep in her thoughts that she had completely forgotten where she was and had been paying no attention to Lydia's explicit demonstration.

She stood in front of the wall mirror in the dressing-room arranging the crumpled woollen stole about her shoulders with trembling fingers. Oh well, she decided

with sinking heart, there was nothing for it but to exhibit her ignorance in front of the whole class and invite Lydia Durack's malice for a second time in one morning. Then a new thought came to her. Dash it all, she'd used a stole before now, hadn't she? What was so special about wearing it?

Her eyes sparkling with the challenge of the situation, she glided into the centre of the room, manipulating the stole as she turned and strolled towards the cat-walk. "Mink," she told herself, "blond mink." She snuggled her face luxuriously against it, slung it arrogantly over her shoulder and then walked from the platform trailing it negligently behind her as though it was a costly fur costing hundreds of pounds instead of a tattered studio prop.

"You should have seen Mme. Durack's face as you walked out," Anne told her when they broke for lunch. "Murder was the least of it."

"I thought I was going to die though when she called on me," Sara admitted. "I expect she saw I hadn't been attending."

"How could anyone have been attending after those mean things she said to you?" Marion cried indignantly. "It was all my fault too for making you late."

"Not to worry," Sara reassured her. "I owe all my success to you anyway. All I had to do was think of your mother's beautiful mink stole, and after that it was easy."

"Mink!" exclaimed Anne comically. "No wonder. All I could think of was my mother's five-year-old black fox."

"Darling, you were simply divine," Diana drifted up to announce. "Nina turned positively sea green, I swear she did."

"Honestly, it was a fluke," Sara protested, beginning to feel a little overwhelmed by all the praise.

"It was no fluke," Elspeth said seriously. "You can forget the modesty, Sara Gay. You're a born model, and this proves it."

"Try telling that to Mme. Durack," Sara suggested wryly.

"Sweetie-pie, 'Auntie' Lydia knows it already," Diana said. "That's why she's so livid. I wonder what other brick bats she's got in store for you. I'm sure stopping your coffee break is only the first one."

"Shut up, you idiot!" Anne exclaimed. "If you go on this way you'll have Sara worried."

Sara smiled gratefully at Anne. "She can't murder me anyway," she protested, sounding braver than she was feeling. She was determined not to let the thought of Lydia's malice spoil her present triumph. After all, the woman could not really hurt her, however much she might want to. All Lydia Durack could do was make things unpleasant enough to drive her to throw up the course before graduating!

"Never!" Sara vowed, for if she did that, no Model Agency would ever take her on their books. "Whatever she does to me, however spiteful, I'll have to stick it out. No-one is going to stop me from becoming a model!"

CHAPTER IX

DURING that afternoon a behind-the-scenes visit was arranged to one of the London stores, and as they trooped off the bus at Knightsbridge, Sara clutched excitedly at Elspeth's arm.

"Look!" she cried and pointed across the street.

Against the frontage of a new office block spanning the entrance to the park, were grouped four or five beautiful girls wearing magnificent ball gowns, fur wraps and and jewels. They chatted nonchalantly among themselves while in front of them, his camera tilted at an angle, crouched a young man in a grey flannel suit.

"How stupid they look," Marion remarked scornfully. "Fancy wearing evening dress at this time in the afternoon."

"I wonder if they're film stars?" Anne said, intrigued.

"Film stars!" Sara exclaimed with scorn. "Anne, you are a clot! They're models!"

There was a moment's silence while the other girls digested this information, then a burst of excited talk.

Diana's voice broke through the general chatter. "I say, let's stroll across and take a closer look."

"Dare we?" Elspeth glanced at her watch. "It's almost two-fifteen and we don't want to be late."

"Come on." Sara seized her hand. "We've got till half-past. That gives us masses of time. This is a chance to see real models on the job."

Her enthusiasm was infectious and as the lights changed to red they darted across the road to join the cluster of bystanders gazing wide-eyed at the model girls in their magnificent clothes.

"Why, I believe that's Harriet Vane," Elspeth exclaimed, pointing out a vivacious brunette in the forefront of the group. "They use her a lot in the French fashion magazines."

"Wasn't she the one who did that fabulous après-ski series?"

"That's the one." Elspeth's eyes glinted reminiscently. "That's the job for me. From the Swiss mountains to the Venice Lido!"

"Don't kid yourself," Anne said. "Most likely cardboard mountains in the studio and the sandpit in a children's playground!"

"Did you ever see such a beautiful dress?" Sara whispered, watching Harriet Vane spread out the skirts of her heavily embroidered white ball gown.

"I bet you'd like to be wearing it, wouldn't you, Sara?" Anne teased.

"I'm not sure," Sara said gravely. "You see that green taffeta the red-haired girl on the left is wearing? It doesn't look much, but that's because her hair and skin aren't right for that particular shade. I believe that's the dress I could show best."

Anne stared at Sara, disconcerted. "But you said the white satin was the most beautiful."

"So I did, but any reasonably pretty girl could wear it and look gorgeous in it. But the green taffeta's a dress that *needs* to be shown off." Sara stopped, laughing at herself ruefully. "Oh dear, does that sound horribly conceited?"

"Not from you, Sara," Anne shook her head wonderingly. "Now I begin to understand how you got the scholarship."

At that moment the photographer motioned the other

models to one side to concentrate his camera on Harriet Vane. On his instructions she posed in the act of drawing on her long white gloves while behind her a tall, debonair escort in tails and white tie suddenly materialised. In his outstretched hands he held a sable cloak as if on the point of draping it about Harriet's shoulders.

"I never knew there were men models too," Marion giggled.

"Mostly I think they're out-of-work actors," explained Elspeth. "But then their job isn't to show clothes, only to provide a background for the girl."

"Some of them are more than just background, darling," Diana said. "Haven't you seen those ads: about what the well-dressed young man will be wearing this season?"

"Well, I'm all for it," Anne said. "I think—"

But what Anne thought, no-one was ever to hear, for just then a clock struck the half-hour and with a cry of horror they started a mad sprint back across the street and along the Brompton Road. With Sara leading and Marion bringing up the rear they covered the distance in record breaking time and to their intense relief found the rest of the class still assembled in the main hall of the store.

"You're okay," Jean assured the late-comers. "We're still waiting for Mme. Durack and Nina."

"Lovely!" laughed Elspeth. "Everyone get their breath back and look as if they've been kicking their heels here for hours."

"Wouldn't I laugh if Madame Sourface turned up good and late!" Sylvie gave a skip of malicious enjoyment at the thought. "That would teach her not to go on about punctuality like she does."

"No such luck," Jean groaned as Lydia Durack approached with her niece. "Here they come now. Golly, no wonder they're late. They're dressed to kill."

Lydia Durack bore down on her class briskly. In spite of her dislike of the woman Sara could not restrain her

instinctive appreciation of Mme. Durack's distinguished appearance. At the studio she was invariably seen in a straight skirt with a well-cut silk shirt. This afternoon however she wore a softly tailored beige suit in a finely woven jersey with a small hat of the same material. Her only jewellery was one long string of amber beads and her brown gloves, leather shoes and bag were impeccable. The striking simplicity of her outfit had the effect of reducing even her niece's exquisite printed silk dress and jacket to a mere remarkable prettiness while, as for the rest of the girls, even the least fashion conscious of them could not help feeling like an ungroomed schoolgirl.

"Oh, my dears," Nina drawled affectedly, "never try parking a car in London. Not unless you want to experience hell!"

"Not having cars, sweetie," Diana drawled back with a sarcasm entirely lost on Nina, "that's an experience the rest of us are spared."

"I regret to have kept you waiting," Lydia Durack told the girls stiffly. "As my niece has just remarked, it was the car. However, that is no excuse, only an explanation." She smiled frostily. "I ask you all to remember that in our profession there is never any excuse for unpunctuality."

"Well, what do you know?" Elspeth whispered in mock admiration as Lydia swept them grandly through the hall and on to the escalator. "How's that for sliding out of a sticky corner?"

But Sara was too absorbed in a detailed study of Mme. Durack's appearance to feel a proper indignation at the cunning way she had contrived to turn an awkward situation to advantage. Lost in admiration of the woman's distinctive elegance, she could only exclaim: "What a suit! I've never seen anything to equal it."

Her remark, intended for Elspeth's ears alone, was unfortunately overheard by Lydia Durack. Stepping off the

escalator as it reached the first floor she swung round to stare at the girl who had made it.

"Help!" Sara groaned to herself. "Now I'm going to be told off for making personal remarks."

But Lydia Durack only asked coolly: "You admire my suit, Sara?"

It there was one thing more terrifying than Lydia Durack in a rage, Sara decided, it was Lydia Durack making some show of affability. But she did think it was a beautiful suit and there could surely be no harm in saying so.

"It's lovely," she said enthusiastically.

"So? You would not say perhaps that it was a little too plain? Different buttons, perhaps? A contrast on the pockets?"

Sara shook her head. "It's quite perfect. To add anything would only spoil it."

"You have good taste," Lydia Durack allowed unwillingly.

"Thank you," Sara replied and, raising her eyes quickly to her adversary, surprised a look of grudging admiration on the woman's face. The expression vanished almost before Sara had time to record it, and immediately Lydia Durack was her familiar self again.

"Excellent taste," she repeated sourly. "But I warn you. It would be unwise to let it go to your head."

Fortunately at that moment a petite brunette hurried forward to greet them. This was Miss Morgan from the public relations department, already well-known to Mme. Durack who had brought along many previous parties from the Lena Lane school.

Miss Morgan took the girls under her wing and for the next two hours they were treated to a fascinating glimpse of the intricate human machinery needed to control the smooth-running efficiency of a store. But it was not until

they reached the Model Gown Department that Sara's own interest was aroused.

"And now," said Miss Morgan, "I have a surprise for you all." She smiled at Lydia Durack. "I wonder if you recognise anyone here?"

A girl wearing an elegant sheath dress came strolling across to them and as she drew near they realised she was a model.

"Why, it's the blonde who was modelling the bikini at the Passing Out Parade on Monday," Anne exclaimed as the girl stopped in front of Lydia Durack. "Gosh, *she* got a job quickly."

Several of the girls were admiring the dress and the model said with great composure: "This satin is the heaviest available on the market and is exclusive to this store. Notice the detachable belt." She turned to display her back, detaching and re-attaching the belt with a swift, graceful hand movement.

"Very nice indeed, Joanna," Lydia Durack said with approval.

"No-one would possibly guess this was only Joanna's second day with us," Miss Morgan beamed. "But then, when a girl graduates from the Lena Lane Model School she's already half-way to being a veteran! It's a great testimonial to your training, Mme. Durack."

"Thank you." Lydia accepted the tribute regally. "Mrs. Lane will be as delighted as I am to know you feel that way about our students."

It was not until later when, the tour over, they parted from Mme. Durack and Nina that a crowd of girls relaxed in a nearby coffee bar to talk over all they had seen.

"That store's like a world of its own," Diana remarked. "Quite incredible."

"There must be hundreds of people working there who never even get the chance of speaking to a customer," Anne said amazed.

"That girl Joanna was terrific, wasn't she?" Sara followed her own train of thought. "No-one could have believed it was her first job."

"A bit hard though just to show the things and then let some other girl have all the fun of selling them," Anne protested.

Sara and Elspeth exchanged a startled glance at Anne's remark and then, as if in silent agreement, chose not to comment on it. More and more Sara was becoming convinced that Anne, though physically everyone's idea of the model girl, was emotionally as little suited to the job as Marion who, at that moment was asking her urgently: "Sara, are you doing anything this evening?"

"Well, no, not really," Sara admitted. She had been planning to wash her hair but she supposed it would have to wait if Marion really needed her. "Is it something important?"

"It is rather."

"All right then. What time shall I come to your home?"

"I don't want you to come to the *house*," Marion said, emphasizing the word, "I want you to meet me out." She hesitated. "Look, there isn't time to go into explanations now. I've managed to persuade Mother I could do without the car for once, but she hates me travelling by bus so if I'm late getting home this afternoon there'll only be more arguments."

"All right then. But where do I meet you?" Sara asked, beginning to get a little impatient.

"At the Albert Hall at twenty-past seven," Marion said.

"But I—"

"It's all right," Marion said quickly, "you don't have to like music. We won't be listening to the concert."

Sara frowned. "I was going to say I don't know how to get there. And I do like music," she protested indignantly.

"Oh dear," Marion exclaimed, "I don't know how you

get there either. I mean, I don't know which bus to take. The best thing would be to come by taxi."

"Maybe it would," Sara said dryly, "but I'm not a Rockefeller!"

"I'll pay for it," Marion said and took a ten shilling note from her bag.

Sara reddened angrily. "I'm not in the habit of taking money, thank you, I can easily find out which bus to take. I'll be at the front entrance of the Albert Hall at twenty-past seven."

"What was all that whispering going on with Marion?" Elspeth asked afterwards as they were waiting at the bus stop together.

"She wants me to meet her tonight," Sara explained, looking troubled. "She made it sound terribly important."

"So watch out," Elspeth warned, "or you'll find yourself getting much too involved with Marion and her troubles. It's her fault you were late back from coffee this morning, and look where *that* landed you!"

Since that was exactly what Sara had been remembering herself it did not make it any easier to hear Elspeth saying it too. She wondered whether she should mention Marion's mysterious remark about not having to like music but decided against it. It would only make Elspeth more disapproving.

"Marion's quite nice when you get to know her," she said defensively. "I really would like to help her if I can."

"Well, don't let her impose on you. You've got enough troubles of your own with Lydia Durack. And this course is important for you."

"The most important thing in the world," Sara said emphatically.

"Well that's what you should be concentrating on, Sara Gay," Elspeth said flatly, "and not on other people's problems!"

Elsbeth's words were still ringing in Sara's head as she watched the Richards' car draw up in the busy forecourt of the Albert Hall that same evening. Pushing her way down the crowded steps to meet it, Sara saw Marion scramble out and look around anxiously.

"Oh, there you are," she exclaimed with relief as she caught sight of Sara. "I wondered if I'd be able to find you in this crush."

Mrs. Richards wound down the car window and Sara caught the flash of diamonds at throat and wrist as she leant forward to speak to her. "Good evening, my dear. How nice to see you again. I'm so glad you were able to come with Marion. Now don't forget," she said, turning to her daughter, "go straight home as soon as the concert's over."

Marion scowled. "I told you I would, Mother."

"For heaven's sake, stop fussing the child," growled a voice from the back and Sara caught a glimpse of a balding, heavy-jowled man in dinner jacket and black tie whom she realised must be Marion's father. Mr. Richards tapped impatiently on the glass partition that separated the back of the car from the driver's seat. "All right, Bennet. Drive on. We'll never get to the theatre at this rate."

"Have a lovely time, girls," Mrs. Richards called and sank back into her seat as the car drove off without further delay.

Sara watched the car out of sight and then turned to remount the steps leading to the concert hall.

"Hi!" Marion clutched at Sara's arm. "Where do you think you're going?"

"Back there, of course. The concert starts in a minute."

"Isn't that a shame," came the mocking answer. "Don't you know people can't go in without tickets?"

Sara stared at her speechless.

"Don't look at me like that," Marion said. "I told you

we wouldn't be hearing the concert. It's like the business of the chocolate biscuits—deceitful!”

“All right then, so I'm priggish,” Sara said, beginning to get annoyed. “If you want to deceive your mother that's your business. But why drag me into it?”

“Because Mother liked you and she never usually likes my friends,” Marion said simply. “I know it's not very nice of me but then I'm not a very nice person.”

“Don't be idiotic,” Sara told her uncomfortably. “Your mother likes me and she's asked me to dinner tomorrow. What am I supposed to do when she starts asking questions about the concert?”

“She won't,” Marion said confidently. “She doesn't know the first thing about music.”

“And you do, I suppose?”

“As a matter of fact, I do,” Marion said laughing. “Anyway, I checked up on the programme and the conductor so as not to be caught out. You don't have to worry,” she assured Sara. “All Mother is likely to ask is whether you enjoyed yourself and what time the concert was over. She's bound to ask you that.”

“What do I say if she does?” Sara asked following Marion back to the main road.

“Say it must have been about ten o'clock, but you didn't look at your watch.”

“If it's over so early,” Sara said surprised, “why on earth was your mother so anxious about you going straight home then?”

“Can't you guess?” Marion's voice was bitter. “Mother's petrified in case I should manage to meet Frank.” Stepping to the edge of the kerb she raised her hand to hail a passing cab. As one pulled to a stop the girl began to laugh. “Wouldn't I love to see her face if she knew that was exactly where I was off to this minute!”

CHAPTER X

MARION jumped into the taxi and gave the driver quick instructions, not realising that Sara had remained on the pavement, her heart pounding uncomfortably.

"Come on," Marion called, holding the door open.

"I'm not coming," Sara said.

From the dark interior of the cab Marion stared round-eyed. "What do you mean?"

"I'm not coming," Sara repeated firmly. "You'd better go alone."

"But I don't want to go alone. Please, Sara. Whatever's got into you?" Marion jumped out and tried to grab hold of Sara's wrist.

"Let me go!" Sara cried indignantly and twisted out of the girl's grasp.

"But I was counting on you coming with me," Marion wailed.

"Make up your mind, Miss," the cab driver said gruffly. "Are you coming or ain't you? I haven't got all evening to waste while you makes up your minds."

Marion's face puckered and she began to cry, slow, difficult tears, that were infinitely pathetic. "You promised to help me. You can't leave me like this."

"All right," Sara said climbing reluctantly into the taxi. "It seems I haven't much choice."

As the cab headed in the direction of Kensington Marion let out a sigh of relief. "Thank goodness for that," she exclaimed dabbing at her eyes. "Sara, what was wrong, what have I done?"

"Don't you know?" Sara asked incredulously.

"No, I can't think why you should be so angry with me."

"For goodness sake," Sara said briskly, "do dry your eyes and listen for a moment. Your mother only said you could go out tonight because she knew you would be with me. She thinks we're safely at a concert and instead here we are, sneaking off to see Frank. Surely you must realise what an awful spot that puts me in?"

"You think I'm just using you," Marion exclaimed unhappily. "But it's not true. It's just that I'm anxious for you to meet Frank and judge him for yourself."

"Then surely it would have been better to have told me straight out what you were planning to do instead of springing it on me like this?" Sara protested, and not for the first time wondered what it was about Marion that always made other people sound such dreadful prigs.

"I was so frightened you'd refuse," Marion broke into Sara's thoughts. "Now I suppose you think I'm deceitful and horrid. I know you do."

It occurred to Sara that Marion had got so used to deceiving her mother that it had become easier for her to do things the complicated way rather than the simple one. To change the subject, she asked:

"Why should you want me to meet Frank anyway? Not that I don't want to meet him," she added hastily. "He sounds nice. But why me?"

"I want to know what you think of him."

"Surely it's not what other people think of him that matters, but what you think of him yourself?"

"I wish that were so," Marion said sorrowfully. "Personally I think he's wonderful. The only trouble is that I don't know how he feels about *me*."

"You're joking!" Sara said in astonishment.

"No I'm not. Mother's got me so confused that I can't rely on my own judgement any more. She's continually saying that anyone who's interested in me must have an ulterior motive. That's why I want you to see Frank for yourself. You're sensible, Sara. You're my only friend."

"Oh dear," Sara thought wryly, "as if I haven't got my own troubles!" Elspeth's words rang like a warning in her ears, yet she could not help feeling sympathy towards the girl beside her and, taking Marion's hand, she squeezed it sympathetically.

"I think you've got to have more faith in yourself, Marion. And faith in Frank too."

"I have, I have! At least I have whenever I'm *with* him. It's when I'm away from him that I lose confidence in myself and start thinking that no-one can ever love me for what I am—only for what I have!"

"But surely you can tell whether or not Frank's after your money? I mean, you might not be able to judge about love and things like that, but it can't be so hard to guess if a boy is interested in cash."

"It wouldn't be hard if I were left alone to make up my own mind," Marion retorted. "But Mother won't stop interfering in my life. When I tell her that Frank's different, that he's kind and straightforward, she always throws up in my face that he was quite willing to stop seeing me after she'd gone to have a talk with him."

Sara digested this information. "Did he tell you why he was willing to give you up?"

"Well, he told *me* that it was because he didn't want to come between me and my parents," Marion answered. "But Mother says the real reason is that he knows that if I marry without their approval, that I won't get a penny." Marion leaned forward. "And now, of course, I don't know what to think! I'm so muddled and confused I could scream!"

The taxi turned off the main road and came to a halt in a small side turning.

"Now do you see why this evening is so important to me?" the girl went on. "You're the one person in the world who's opinion I respect. If you tell me something I'll believe it."

She jumped out of the cab and handed the taxi driver some money, then, not waiting for the change, she walked towards the door of a shop.

Disquieted, Sara followed. It might do her ego good to know that another human being trusted her so implicitly, but it also put a great responsibility on her shoulders. But unhappily there was nothing she could do for the moment except run away—and running away was something Sara had never done in her life!

The windows of the pet shop were in darkness but Marion pressed the bell marked "Surgery" and after a few moments a curtain at the rear of the shop was drawn back to throw out a sharp beam of light. As the door opened Sara heard the sound of barking in many registers, from the sharp yelp of a poodle to the deeper tones of alsatian and boxer.

"Why, Marion, how lovely to see you," cried the girl who had unlocked the door to them. "Come on in." She drew them into the interior of the shop and locking the door behind her led the way through the curtains at the far end.

"This is a friend of mine, Sara Gay," Marion said, introducing her shyly. "Sara, this is Frank's sister, Babs. I told you Babs runs the pet shop."

Sara smiled at the tall, well-built girl wearing slacks and a man's check shirt with the sleeves rolled up above the elbows. She had large, short-sighted grey eyes in an open, weatherbeaten face, and her long brown hair was caught back in an untidy pony tail. A tiny monkey which Sara recognised as a marmoset was curled up on her left shoulder.

"Oh dear," Babs exclaimed ruefully as she wiped her large, capable hand on her workmanlike blue jeans and held it out, "sorry to be in this state, but I'm just giving the animals their feed. Marion, old thing, show your friend round while I clear up some of the mess."

Sara looked about her curiously. All round the room she saw large, airy cages full of clean, sweet-smelling straw which housed puppies of a variety of breeds, some alone, some with their mothers. She stopped to push her fingers through the fine wire netting and some of the puppies stirred themselves and came to the wire to lick her fingers enthusiastically.

"Marion, what darlings they are. However would one be able to choose?"

"Babs always says she gets so fond of them she hates making a sale. Oh look," she broke off, pointing to a smaller cage where a magnificently aristocratic Persian lay proudly surveying a litter of six minute kittens. "Those are Beauty's very first kittens."

"Aren't they poppets?" Babs said, shutting the door of the aviary which held a collection of many-coloured budgerigars. "These are our boarders," she told Sara leading the way into a covered yard where a number of bigger dogs were bedded down for the night in kennels. "People leave their pets with us when they go on holiday. It's wonderful how quickly they settle in and stop feeling homesick, though they're always overjoyed when their owners come to fetch them home again."

"It's not only dogs," Marion told Sara. "Sometimes it's snakes or lizards."

"Yes, we've had all sorts of visitors," Babs concurred. "Everything from tropical fish to a pair of lion cubs. Tinker's our only exotic guest at present though," she said, indicating the tiny monkey still snuggled comfortably on her shoulder.

"Well, that's the lot I think," she said cheerfully, turn-

ing off the lights after a last look round to make sure everything was in order. "All quiet and peaceful. Take Sara upstairs to the flat and I'll be with you in a few minutes."

Sara followed Marion up the narrow stairs and into a comfortably untidy living-room with worn leather armchairs, old-fashioned furniture and walls hung with eighteenth-century hunting prints.

"The kitchen and Frank's surgery are on this floor," Marion told Sara, "and the bedrooms and bathroom are above. I think it must be fun living over the shop."

"We've no choice in this line," Babs said coming back to join them. "You have to live on the job. Still, we love it." She had washed her face, put some powder on her nose and brushed out her hair which now hung loose and shining around her shoulders. She threw herself into one of the armchairs which creaked comfortably under her weight. "How about a nice brew up?" she asked. "Go and put the kettle on, there's a good kid."

Marion disappeared into the kitchen and came back in a few seconds. "The kettle's on. It shouldn't take too long to boil."

"What's news?" Babs asked her. "Frank never told me you were dropping in this evening."

"He didn't know," Marion admitted, flushing a little. She swallowed hard. "Isn't he— isn't he in tonight?"

"He got a call just as we finished dinner and went rushing off to look at a sick pup. You know Frank," she laughed, "he'd leave a soufflé to go flat as a pancake rather than turn down a call! Anyway, he should be back soon."

"I've missed you a lot." Marion sighed and looked around the cosy sitting-room as if remembering the many happy hours spent there.

"We've missed you too, I can tell you that. No-one to help take the dogs for a run or brew up tea or give Frank a hand in the surgery." Picking up a copy of the *Tail*

Wagger she tossed it across to Marion. "Recognise anyone?"

Marion thumbed through the magazine and let out a cry of delight as she came to a photograph. "Why, that's Mrs. Carrington's boxer, Benjie, the one I helped you groom. Has he really got a first?"

"Knew you'd be thrilled. Hi, there's the kettle."

A high-pitched whistle shrilled through the room and Marion obediently trotted off to see to it.

Sara heard the clatter of cups and saucers and presently Marion came back balancing a heavy tray which she set down on a table at the side of Babs' chair.

Sara watched, fascinated to see the usually clumsy and helpless Marion become so capable and assured in these new surroundings, where she seemed more at home than Sara had ever seen her.

"You'll find a cake in that cupboard," Babs said lazily, and Marion produced a delicious looking chocolate cake which she set on the table.

"Home-made," Babs announced. "Frank says it's good and you know that's worth a lot coming from a brother."

It really did look good and Sara was surprised to hear Marion say, "Not for me, thanks."

She was even more astonished when Babs rejoined, "Oh dear, Marion always puts me to shame. I'm so greedy about cakes. You're quite sure I can't tempt you?"

"Quite sure," Marion said in a firm voice. "I'll just have a plain biscuit."

"Well, you know where the tin is. How about you, Sara?" Babs asked, her knife poised over the cake.

"Yes, please," Sara said, not daring to look in Marion's direction in case she started giggling. "It looks so delicious I can't resist it."

"It's different for you," Marion said. "You don't need to diet."

"Well I do," Babs said, "but I simply can't. I wish I had half Marion's will-power."

This was too much for Sara who started to choke and had to pretend a crumb had gone down the wrong way. Fortunately at that moment there was the sound of a key in the front door and all the dogs started barking.

"That's Frank now," Babs said as a large young man with a mop of unruly brown curls walked into the room carrying a small, unhappy looking fox terrier puppy wrapped in a worn piece of blanket.

"Oh, the poor scrap. What's wrong with him?" Babs cried.

"Broken leg," the young man said briefly. Then he saw Marion sitting in the chair opposite Babs and his face broke into a delighted smile. "Marion, what a wonderful surprise! Just when I most need you too." He kissed her warmly and deposited the shivering morsel on her lap. "Look after Tiny Tim, dearest, while I scrub up, and then you can hold him for me while I set the leg."

Babs took his shabby tweed jacket from him. "Frank, this is Sara Gay, a friend of Marion's."

Frank took Sara's hand in his huge paw and shook it so hard she could almost feel the bones crack. "How d'you do?" he murmured politely but vaguely and Sara saw he had eyes for no-one but Marion.

"Ulterior motive indeed!" she thought scornfully. "He's just as taken with her as she is with him. Anyone with half an eye could see it."

"This puppy looks half-starved," Marion murmured out loud and turned down a corner of the blanket. "Oh!" she cried and stared at the puppy with horror. "Look, it's not just his leg. He's been ill-treated. See this dreadful sore on his side."

Frank, huge in a spotless white overall, came back into the room smoothing on rubber gloves. "Now come on, old

thing, don't start upsetting yourself. The sooner we get to work on him, the quicker he'll start recovering."

"At least he couldn't be in better hands," Marion told Frank trustingly. Carrying her small burden with great care she followed Frank into his surgery.

When the door had closed behind them, Sara turned to Babs. "Surely that's a case for the R.S.P.C.A.?"

"Frank's well-known in the neighbourhood," Babs explained, "and he often gets called out on this sort of case. I think people are scared of trouble and don't like reporting neighbours to the authorities. But everyone knows they can count on Frank. He's the most easy going person in the world until it comes to ill-treating animals, and then he just sees red." She laughed wryly. "He'll never get rich this way, but that's not something he's likely to worry about."

"Marion says he's a wonderful vet."

"He is," Frank's sister said enthusiastically. "Marion would be pretty good herself, you know. It's a shame her parents won't agree to let her do the training. Frank says she's the best assistant he's ever had." She broke off to ask, the grey eyes narrowed, "Are you an old friend of hers? She's never mentioned you to us."

"I've only met her recently," Sara admitted. "This week in fact."

Carefully skating over the actual details of how they had come to strike up a friendship, Sara told Babs about the Lena Lane School.

"A model school doesn't sound much up Marion's street," Babs commented when Sara had finished.

"It isn't. It's her mother's idea. Marion absolutely hates it."

"Marion's a nice kid, but lets her mother organise her life for her. It's time she learnt to stand up for herself a bit. Mind you I think she's learning a bit," Babs conceded. "It's the first time she's been here for over three weeks.

Ever since Mrs. Richards told her she wasn't to go on seeing Frank."

"You can't altogether blame Marion for that," Sara rushed to her friend's defence. "It's your brother's fault too. He told her he didn't want to come between her and her parents."

"What else do you expect him to say? Frank feels he's got no right to ask Marion to give up her beautiful home for this." Babs waved an expressive hand around the homely living-room.

"But Marion's at home here!" Sara cried. "You ought to see how different she is in her own house, miserable and sort of prickly and on edge. This place is right for her, I know it is."

"Well, I wish you could make Frank see that," his sister said. "Isn't it strange? Frank's dreadfully shy as a rule. A pretty girl like you would scare him out of his wits. As a matter of fact, I've never really seen him look at a girl before. But he and Marion seemed to hit it off from the moment they met. I think they're just right for each other. If only Marion didn't have such idiotic social-climbing parents."

"I think it's mostly Mrs. Richards," Sara ventured. "Marion hasn't said anything about her father."

Babs snorted. "I've no time for men who can't control their wives. Oh yes, and I've heard all about the sister who died. Of course it's tragic. But if Marion has any spunk she won't allow an old tragedy to ruin her own life. If Marion really loves Frank she must show it by standing up for him with her parents."

"At least she's lucky in having you on her side," Sara remarked.

"Well, for goodness sake," Babs said astonished, "do you honestly think I'm the sort of person to be jealous of my brother's girl-friend? I like Marion and I think she's right for Frank. This may only be a flat over a shop, but there's

enough room for all of us. And more than enough work—I can tell you that! Besides,” she laughed, “you surely don’t think I want to end up as the spinster sister housekeeping for her bachelor brother. Even when the brother’s as nice as mine!”

“Well what do you know?” demanded Frank, coming back into the room at that moment. “Words of praise from big sister are words of praise indeed.”

“You’d better forget you heard them or you’ll be getting a swelled head.” Babs looked anxiously at the puppy Frank was carrying. One back leg stuck straight up in the air, and a wide bandage was around its stomach. “How did it go?” she asked.

“No trouble at all,” Marion announced. “He’s a brave little chap. Though Frank’s so quick I don’t think he really suffered at all. Now all we need is a basket and some clean bedding for him.”

“I’ll get it for you,” Babs cried and hurried from the room.

The puppy stirred in Frank’s arms and weakly tried to lick Marion’s hand with his small rough tongue.

She bent her head close to it. “Do you think he might drink some warm milk if I prepared it for him?”

“If he’ll take it from anyone,” Frank said, his face alight with pride and tenderness as he looked at her, “he’ll certainly take it from you.”

Sara felt tears prick her eyes and turned away quickly. After money indeed! The only thing this big, ungainly and tender young man was after, was Marion!

CHAPTER XI

"SARA GAY!" Lydia Durack's sharp voice caught Sara when she was almost out of the door. "Where do you think you are going?"

"Why, to coffee . . ." Sara's words died away as memory returned in a rush. The thought of the coffee break, which hung like a cloud over her head when she first awoke that day had slipped from her mind during the morning session.

"I'm sorry, Mme. Durack," she stammered, unpleasantly aware how feeble it must sound. "I'm afraid I'd forgotten all about staying behind."

"A very convenient bad memory," came the sneering reply. "Not only are you an unpunctual model, but you've got a bad memory too! And I suppose you were hoping I might forget your punishment as well. You little fool!"

Trapped in the empty studio Sara felt herself encircled by the force of Lydia Durack's malevolence.

"You think you are going to be a great model, don't you, Sara Gay? Well, let me tell you one thing: you have a long way to go yet and many things can happen between now and the end of the course. All right," she snapped, "let us see how good your balance is. Take that book from the desk, place it on your head and practise walking."

"But Mme. Durack," Sara protested, staring appalled

at the massive encyclopaedia on Lydia's table. "I can't possibly walk with that on my head."

"You can't or you won't? Do as I say," Lydia Durack grated, "and spare me the excuses. I tell you, Sara Gay, I have had more than enough of your conceit and insolence."

Realising the hopelessness of argument Sara picked up the heavy volume which felt as if it weighed at least a ton and tried desperately to balance it on her head. As soon as she attempted to take a couple of steps the book slithered off and she was forced to make a grab at it. Every time this happened she was sent back to the dressing-room entrance to begin all over again.

Under cover of a pretence of busying herself with paper work, Lydia Durack watched Sara's struggles, a cruel smile on her thin lips and, seeing it, Sara felt her temper rising.

"In one moment," she thought, almost beyond caring that this was exactly what the woman was hoping she would do, "I'll throw this book across the room and walk out of the school!"

"For goodness sake, whatever is going on in here?" a voice cried from the end of the room.

Sara swung round, sending the heavy book crashing to the floor as Lena Lane swept majestically into the studio.

Lydia Durack jumped to her feet scattering papers in every direction. "I'm giving Sara some extra tuition in walking," she said quickly. "It is nothing, Lena."

Wishing she had the nerve to call Mme. Durack a liar to her face, Sara bent down to retrieve the book. A showdown between herself and the Principal's assistant would only end in Sara's dismissal—for after all it was easier to get another pupil than another partner!

"Sara!" Mrs. Lane's voice jerked her back to the present. "Show me the book you were balancing."

Sara handed it across and the woman looked at it.

"*The Encyclopaedia of Costume*," she read out in a resonant voice. "My dear child, if you wish to absorb this

valuable information the best way is surely through the eyes and not the head! Mme. Durack," she asked, turning to the other woman, "do you have an explanation for this?"

White faced, her eyes blazing, Lydia pointed a trembling finger at the table. "These stupid children. You cannot take your eyes from them for one moment. I told her to practise walking with a book on her head. This was the book I meant." She indicated a slim ledger that Sara was certain had not been visible five minutes earlier. "You surely cannot think I would tell her to try walking with a book that size?"

"It certainly strikes me as a little improbable," Mrs. Lane regarded her assistant quizzically. "Shall we say there has been a little misunderstanding and leave it at that? But what," she asked, "is Sara doing up here in any case? Why isn't she at coffee?"

"I suggest you ask Sara that question."

"Well, Sara," the Principal swung round. "What have you to say for yourself?"

"I was late back from my coffee break yesterday," Sara admitted reluctantly.

"I see," Mrs. Lane looked disappointed. "I am afraid you still do not appear to look on punctuality as one of the necessary virtues."

"You would be surprised at all the things Sara does not consider necessary," Lydia Durack remarked acidly. "Not bothering to pay attention during classes, for instance. But then, Sara is quite sure she is the perfect model already, and there is nothing left that we can teach her."

Sara did not have red hair for nothing. Infuriated beyond caution by the injustice of the woman's accusations, she lost her temper.

"That isn't true and you know it," she cried. "Every word you've said is a lie!"

"How dare you answer me back that way? How dare

you!" Lydia seized Sara's shoulders and began to shake her.

"Lydia!" Mrs. Lane's horrified exclamation ripped through the air, bringing the younger woman abruptly to her senses. Her hands dropped to her sides and she turned away and sank into the nearest chair. "I am sorry," she gasped. "I cannot think what has come over me." One manicured hand pressed to her forehead, she closed her eyes, breathing agitatedly.

Sara was convinced she was only acting, but the act, if act it was, appeared to satisfy Mrs. Lane.

"You've been working too hard, Lydia," she said with concern. "You must relax more. Be sensible, my dear, and take the rest of the day off."

"No, it is all right. In a minute I shall be myself again."

"Well at least go and ask Polly to let you have some sal volatile. Go on now, that's an order." Mrs. Lane waited until her assistant had left the room before turning to Sara. "My dear, you're a sensible child. Will you do me a favour and forget this unfortunate incident?"

"I won't talk about it to the others if that's what you mean," Sara replied, "but you surely can't expect me to forget it?"

"Now Sara," Mrs. Lane reproved, "I'm disappointed in you. That isn't a very nice attitude."

"I'm sorry," Sara said stubbornly, "but if you knew the whole story you'd understand."

"I understand very well. You are like all young people—reluctant to take orders."

"It isn't that at all," Sara protested indignantly. "I'm quite willing to take orders from anyone, provided they're fair and honest ones. Believe me, I do attend properly during classes. There's a terrible lot to learn and I don't want to miss any part of it. It just isn't true what Mme. Durack told you about me. You can't imagine how much it means to me to be here."

"I do realise, Sara. But at least you must admit that part of Mme. Durack's accusation is true. Punctuality is hardly one of your virtues, is it? You were even late in attending the interview for your Scholarship!"

"That wasn't my fault. Please, Mrs. Lane, I'd like to—"

"No, no, Sara," Mrs. Lane expostulated impatiently, "I think we've had enough recrimination for one morning. I don't want to hear any more. Mme. Durack may not be the easiest person to get along with, but she is a first-class instructor and if you're a sensible girl you'll take advantage of all she can teach you. As for punctuality, I'm afraid no-one can teach you that, it's something entirely up to you."

"As long as you don't think too badly of me, that's all that matters," Sara replied. "I couldn't bear it if you listened to what—to what other people said."

"Don't you think you can trust me to form my own judgement? You're going to be a good model, Sara. I have every faith in you." Mrs. Lane smiled. Then added significantly: "And I think perhaps it's time Mme. Durack realised exactly the sort of hopes I have about you!"

Whether or not Mrs. Lane kept her promise immediately, Sara had no way of telling, but it was certainly a much subdued Lydia Durack who returned to the studio after that eventful coffee break. She was noticeably less exacting and sarcastic than usual and, far from picking on Sara, for the rest of the day she contrived whenever possible to ignore her. In any case, as Sara told Marion on the way home with her that evening, nothing Lydia could do seemed important now she knew Mrs. Lane was unlikely to be influenced by her assistant.

"It's my opinion," Marion remarked, "that Mrs. Lane doesn't think so highly of Lydia Durack herself."

"Whatever makes you say that?"

"Oh all sorts of things." Marion said mysteriously.

"Come off it! You must have a reason for saying it."

"Well, for instance, one or two little things she let slip

that morning she had me on the carpet. Nothing definite but to the effect that nobody sensible was going to pay much attention to spiteful remarks. And that spiteful people were often unhappy people so we should try and feel sorry for them instead of disliking them."

"If she doesn't think much of loathsome Lydia," Sara objected, "why does she have her as her assistant?"

"Maybe she feels sorry for her," Marion laughed. "I don't know. Maybe she can't help herself. In business you have to do a lot of things you don't really want to. After all," she said wryly, "Mrs. Lane had to accept me."

"You mean Lydia Durack might have some sort of hold over her?" Sara demanded excitedly.

"Sara, you really are a dreadful romantic. No, not that. But she could be well in with somebody Mrs. Lane can't easily offend."

"Of course—that's it!" Sara exclaimed, the scene in the Board Room flashing like a photograph across her brain. The coarse-featured man in the check suit sitting next to Lydia Durack . . . "Marion," she demanded, "have you ever heard of someone called Charles Murray?"

Marion thought hard. "No, I can't say I have. Should I?"

"That depends." Briefly Sara sketched in the people at the Director's meeting. "I couldn't make out exactly who he was or what he was doing there," she ended, "but he certainly seemed to be well in with Lydia Durack."

"Maybe he's her boyfriend," Marion suggested with a giggle.

"I never thought of that. Hardly her type I'd have said, but I suppose you can never tell with these things. They were certainly nasty enough for each other!"

"Why don't you ask my parents?" Marion suggested. "They know an awful lot of people in the fashion trade."

"Charles Murray?" Mrs. Richards speculated later that evening as they sat over their after-dinner coffee in the

Louis Quinze drawing-room. From her bag she produced a minute jewelled snuff-box containing saccharine and held it out to Marion who took one and dropped it in her coffee reluctantly.

"Why doesn't her mother give her the opportunity to refuse the sugar first?" Sara wondered, remembering the previous evening and the determined way in which Marion had steadfastly refused to sample Babs' delicious chocolate cake. It had been the same all through dinner, Sara realised, with Mrs. Richards anxiously diverting every fattening dish before it had a chance of getting anywhere near her daughter. "If only she'd let Marion decide for herself not to eat potatoes or pudding or whatever it is," Sara thought, "instead of always making the decision for her." No wonder Marion was rebellious and took every opportunity to defy her mother.

"Charles Murray," Mrs. Richards murmured again. "Now where have I heard that name before?"

Mr. Richards put a light to his cigar. "Red-faced man who looks like a bookmaker?" he asked Sara. "You keep away from him, my dear. Nasty piece of work if ever I saw one."

"You *do* know him then?"

"More's the pity!" Mr. Richards frowned. "What makes you ask about him?"

"He's a director of the Lena Lane School," Sara told him.

"Is he now? I'm sorry to hear it. Runs a wholesale dress house, name's on the tip of my tongue."

"Charleston Charmers!" Mrs. Richards exclaimed. "I knew I'd heard that name before."

"Charleston Charmers!" Mr. Richards said disgustedly. "Typical of the fellow. Still, give him his due, he's a clever business man. Came into the trade knowing nothing and built his company up into one of the biggest mass production set-ups in the country. If you see any cheap

dress that's smart and gimmicky, you can rest assured it's a Charleston Charmer."

"I've heard a rather different story," Mrs. Richards interrupted. "Isn't it rumoured that it's his wife who's the real business brain behind that outfit?"

"Could very well be. Murray inherited a small textile firm from his father and it stayed small until after he married. So he's on the board of your school, is he? Very interesting. That sort of boulder pushes his way in everywhere."

"Be fair, dear," Mrs. Richards protested. "His designs are excellent. In fact," she indicated the full skirted dress in Black Watch tartan with its white collar and cuffs which Sara was wearing, "that might very well come out of his workshops!"

"My goodness, I believe it has," Sara cried in dismay. "Marion, see if you can see the label for me."

Marion felt around the back of the collar and peered at the label. "It's a Charleston Charmer, all right," she giggled.

Sara fingered the dress with disgust. "I don't think I'll ever want to wear it again."

Mrs. Richards laughed. "Even if you dislike the man it doesn't mean you have to dislike his dresses. You look very sweet in it, my dear."

"I feel awful," Sara confessed. "As a matter of fact, I felt awful even before I knew who made it. I've wanted to apologise all evening for coming like this but I just didn't think about dressing for dinner."

"I'm terribly sorry, Sara," Marion apologised. "It slipped my mind. I should have told you Mother always dresses for dinner."

"My dear child, don't be so absurd, you'll embarrass Sara. This is only an old thing," said Mrs. Richards, absurdly dismissing her exquisite black lace dinner dress. "But of course it's so typical of Marion not to give a

thought to what her friend would want to wear."

"She'll know for next time, won't she?" Marion said sullenly.

Her mother glared at her before turning to Sara. "You don't dress for dinner at home then?" she enquired solicitously.

Sara looked from Mrs. Richards in her Tarquin model to Mr. Richards in his velvet smoking jacket, puffing away at his large cigar, and wanted to giggle as she remembered her own homely family meals with her father in his old tweed jacket and her mother in housedress and apron hurrying backwards and forwards between kitchen and dining-room.

"We're a very ordinary family," she explained, and suddenly found herself wishing, for the first time in her life it was not quite so ordinary.

"But I'm sure a very nice one," Mrs. Richards told her in a condescending way. "I expect your mother is very proud of you," she went on. "She must have such fun buying lots of pretty clothes for you."

Sara had a sudden vision of her plump, practical mother in serviceable shoes and sensible hat hurrying off to one of her numerous committees. "I'm afraid Mummy's not very interested in clothes," she said regretfully. "She likes to see me looking nice, of course, though she doesn't always approve of some of the things I want to buy. She says being tidy and neat is more important than being fashionable."

"What a shame," Mrs. Richards cried sympathetically. "And here I am with a daughter who couldn't be less interested in what she wears. Sometimes it does seem as if things are very badly arranged."

"Isn't it a pity, Mother, you can't swop daughters with Mrs. Gay?"

"Marion, that's a dreadful thing to say!" Mrs. Richards' eyes filled with tears. "And just look how you're embarrassing poor Sara."

"Poor Sara" felt herself immediately grow scarlet with embarrassment while Mrs. Richards took a handkerchief from her bag and pressed it delicately to her eyes.

"Marion," growled her father, "now look what you've done to your mother. Apologise to her at once!"

"I'm sorry, Mother. I didn't mean to upset you."

Just then the door was opened by the butler. "Sir Geoffrey Agnew wishes to speak with you on the telephone, sir," he announced. "Will you take the call here or in the library?"

"Thank you, Jepson. In the library, please," replied Mr. Richards, thankfully making his getaway.

His departure left Sara feeling more in the way than ever. She sat marooned in her chair dreading an appeal from one side or the other and wishing herself a thousand miles away.

Mrs. Richards waited until the door had closed behind her husband. "You can be cruel, Marion," she sighed. "Sometimes I don't think you realise how deeply you hurt me."

"I've said I'm sorry, Mother."

"Sorry! I know how sorry you are. You're a selfish, ungrateful girl and you make me very unhappy."

"What do you think you do to me?" flared Marion, stung into defiance by her mother's reproaches. "Don't you think I get hurt seeing you look at me the way you do? I know exactly what you're thinking. You're wishing all the time that I'd been the one who'd died instead of Eva."

With tears streaming down her cheeks she ran from the room and banged the door behind her.

Sara jumped up to follow but Mrs. Richards called her back.

"Leave her, my dear. I know Marion. She's always best left alone when she has these tantrums. Come here, Sara, I want to talk to you."

Reluctantly Sara came back into the room and, sitting

on the edge of her chair, waited uneasily for Marion's mother to speak.

"I'm afraid you must be thinking dreadful things of us, Sara?"

"It's not that. I just feel horribly in the way."

"Of course," Mrs. Richards said sympathetically. "A scene of this sort is unforgivable in front of strangers. But you know I can't really think of you as a stranger. It's almost as if I thought of you as one of the family. Oh dear," she smiled ruefully, "after the last ten minutes I don't expect you'd very much care to see yourself as one of this particular family." She hesitated. "I—I'm afraid you think I'm rather hard on Marion?"

"I'm sorry you don't get on better," muttered Sara feeling more embarrassment than she had ever felt in her life. Whatever she said from now on would either sound rude or else must be disloyal to her friend!

"I was so pleased when Marion brought you home to tea the other day," Mrs. Richards continued. "She doesn't make friends easily, and the few she has are so seldom people I can approve of. Sometimes I can't help thinking she chooses her friends just to irritate me."

"I'm sure you're wrong, Mrs. Richards, Marion would like to please you, honestly she would."

"All I can say is she has a funny way of showing it. If you only knew the difficulty I have with her before I can even get her to accept an invitation to a party."

"I don't think Marion enjoys parties," Sara said cautiously.

"There you are! What normal young girl doesn't enjoy parties? I'm quite sure *you* adore them!" Mrs. Richards exclaimed triumphantly.

"I haven't been to many. Not the sort you need to dress up for."

"But I'm sure you've always enjoyed the ones you *have* been to. Just the way *I* enjoyed them when I was your age.

And the way Eva would have enjoyed them if she had been spared to us." She shot a quick, almost a sly glance across at Sara. "I expect Marion has spoken to you about Eva?"

Sara nodded, not able to trust herself to say anything.

"She was two years younger than Marion so she would have been just about your age now. She was dark, like me, and so pretty. She was a real little girl from the moment she was old enough to look in a mirror." Mrs. Richards smiled tenderly in recollection and dabbed at her eyes. "Sometimes I even used to worry in case she might grow up too vain."

"I'm so sorry, Mrs. Richards," Sara murmured helplessly.

"I know I shouldn't be burdening you with this, my dear, but I'm telling you all this for Marion's sake. You heard her just now. The poor child can't stop thinking *she* should have been the one to get polio instead of Eva. Poor Marion, she even seems to feel I would have wanted it that way. It's very hurtful for a mother to know her child has such thoughts in her head."

"But it's because Marion feels Eva was all the things she can never be. The sort of girl who enjoys parties and dates and having pretty clothes bought for her."

"That's your sort of girl too, isn't it, Sara?"

Sara felt herself flushing. Had she said too much? Caution returned and she continued more hesitantly. "Marion thinks if Eva had lived you wouldn't have worried so much about her—that she'd have been allowed to go her own way."

"It isn't true!" the woman said vehemently. "I'd have been just as concerned about Marion however many children I had. That's the way mothers are. If only there was some way of making her realise that, it might make all the difference to her attitude."

Sara wanted to say that the best way to turn Marion

from a deceitful, moody girl into a gay, happy one was to let her see Frank and enjoy the life they longed to share together. But that was something only Marion could tell her mother. She was still searching for something soothing yet non-committal to say that would help Mrs. Richards without making things difficult for Marion, when the woman suddenly sprang to her feet.

"Don't let's talk about Marion any more. It only depresses me." She looked at Sara, her eyes bright with tears. But even as she gazed at the girl the sorrow left her face and she leaned forward. "I've just had a wonderful idea! Come with me at once. There's something I want you to see. Something I know you'll love!"

CHAPTER XII

IF Marion's bedroom had been luxurious, the splendour of Mrs. Richards' suite left Sara speechless with awe.

Mrs. Richards laughed gaily when she saw her admiring expression. "I can see you appreciate it, Sara."

"It's like something in a museum," Sara gasped.

"You're not far out. The hangings and decorations are an exact copy of a bedroom at the Palace of Versailles. So is the painted ceiling."

She pointed above her head and Sara craned her neck to examine the cherubs and seraphim which Mrs. Richards would be able to see from her magnificent, canopied bed.

"See these tapestries? They're a representation of a hunting scene. I had them especially woven in France and it took a whole year. But the furniture is genuine and every piece exactly in period."

"It's more beautiful than anything I've ever seen," Sara breathed.

"Wait until you see the bathroom," Mrs. Richards said proudly and threw open the door behind her. Sara stared incredulously. Never had she visualised such luxury. There was thick carpet on the floor, the walls were painted with scenes from Greek mythology and the pale pink bath was shaped like a shell, with gold taps and fittings.

"This is a copy of a bathroom which the Sun King had

designed for Mme. Pompadour," Mrs. Richards told Sara. She laughed as she added, "The plumbing is a hundred per cent twentieth century though. But this isn't what I wanted to show you."

She took Sara back into the bedroom and threw open another door. Sara saw a smaller room lined entirely with cupboards which sprang open at the touch of a concealed switch to reveal Mrs. Richards' wardrobe. One cupboard was devoted to day clothes, another to evening wear, a whole wall was given over to hats and shoes, while in yet another section were lingerie and blouses and bags each in their own separate plastic compartments.

From the cupboard full of evening clothes Mrs. Richards drew out a short gold satin evening dress heavily encrusted with embroidery. She held it up against herself.

"What do you think of this? I wanted it in green, but Tarquin talked me into this colour."

"It's a magnificent dress," Sara said after an almost imperceptible hesitation.

"Ah! I saw you pause. So you think the same as I do! It's not right for me. I knew it from the beginning." She held it out. "You model it for me, Sara."

"May I really?"

In a flash her own woollen dress lay discarded on the floor and she was stepping into the honey-gold satin. As she whirled around, instinctively displaying the width of material in the skirt and the cunning detail of the bodice, her reflection was seen in the multiplicity of mirrors backing the door of every cupboard.

"As I thought," Mrs. Richards murmured. "A dart or two on the waist and it should fit perfectly. There's a coat that goes with it too."

From the cupboard she drew out a magnificent evening coat in pink brocade. The high medici collar made a perfect picture frame for the face while the lining and the cuffs

of the wide sleeves revealed the same satin as the dress.

"I feel like a million dollars!" Sara exclaimed, slipping the coat negligently off her shoulders as she drifted around the dressing-room, displaying the ensemble with true Lena Lane Model School elegance.

"How would you like to model this at the Passing Out parade at the end of your course?" Mrs. Richards asked softly. "You can if you want to."

Sara swallowed hard and stared at her reflection wonderingly. Then impulsively she ran over to the woman and kissed her.

"I'd adore it. How absolutely marvellous of you to suggest it. All the girls will be green with envy. Oh!" She stopped abruptly, staring at Mrs. Richards. "But what about Marion?"

"What about Marion!" exclaimed Marion's mother bitterly. "You can't exactly see her getting into any of my dresses, can you?" She sighed. "Don't worry about Marion. She has a very pretty evening dress and for once I was able to talk her into having the necessary alteration made to it."

Sara smoothed her fingertips with sensuous delight over the smooth heavy satin of the dress. "I'll take really good care of it," she promised.

"That's all right, I know you will. But I'm not lending it to you; I'm giving it to you. It's a present."

"But you can't!" Sara gasped. "It's much too expensive. It's terribly sweet of you and I don't know how to thank you, but I'd far rather just borrow it, honestly I would."

"But I want you to have it," Mrs. Richards insisted. "My dear, if you could only understand how wonderful it is for me to be able to give you something and see your face light up as it did when you first saw yourself in this dress. You'd be doing me a favour, I really mean it."

"I just don't know what to say."

"Then don't say anything."

Sara breathed a sigh of exultation and then quickly

came down to earth. "Can I possibly keep it here? I've nowhere to put it in the hostel. My wardrobe's no bigger than a hat box!"

"Certainly you can keep it here."

Sara sighed. "It's over two weeks to the Passing Out parade. It'll seem further off than ever now."

"How would you like an opportunity of wearing the dress sooner than that?" Mrs. Richards enquired. "I'm making up a party for a big charity ball on Saturday week and we'd love to have you with us."

"That would be marvellous. I've never been to one of those affairs, though I've read about them in Tatler. But are you sure I won't be in the way?"

"Quite sure. Besides, Marion will come much more willingly if she knows you're going to be there."

"I'll have to ask Mummy if I can stay up in town that weekend. But it's all right," Sara said hastily, "I'm sure she'll let me when she knows the reason. Why," she cried happily, "it'll be my first big dance. That's quite an event, isn't it?"

"It has to be. It's the one you'll remember all your life." Mrs. Richard's eyes narrowed as a sudden thought struck her. "It will be over late though and we can't have you playing Cinderella and rushing back to your hostel. Tell your parents I'd like you to sleep here overnight."

Sara nodded, and was preparing to take off the dress when Mrs. Richards stopped her.

"I want to see about altering the waist."

As she spoke she pressed a bell, and almost at once a dark-haired girl in the black silk and lace apron of a personal maid came into the dressing-room. "Ah, Lucille. Do you think you can take in this dress for us? Lucille is a magnificent needlewoman," she explained to Sara.

Lucille dimpled at the compliment and broke into a flood of French.

"Lucille thinks you're beautiful," Mrs. Richards trans-

lated with pleasure. "So beautiful it seems she has forgotten her English!"

"But on mademoiselle, this dress it is *formidable*," Lucille declared with passion. "For you, madame, we agreed always it was nevair right, but for mademoiselle, it is perfect. Wait, I get my pins." Lucille began to take in the waist. "Mademoiselle is a model, no?" she enquired through a mouthful of pins.

"Mademoiselle is a model, yes," laughed Mrs. Richards.

"Not quite," Sara said. "But I'm going to be."

"You will be an excellent mannequin, is that not so, madame?"

"Lucille's a good judge," Mrs. Richards assured Sara. "She was a senior workhand in one of the *grands couturiers* in Paris, and there's nothing she can't tell you about the ins and outs of the rag trade. Isn't that so, Lucille?"

"Madame flatters me. It is an 'ard life, but a fascinating one. Once in it, and you are in it for ever! It is, 'ow you say it—an addiction!"

"Surely you miss it?" Sara exclaimed.

"Ah yes. Sometimes. I miss the excitement, the mystery, the creation. But it is enjoyable to work here. And besides," she dimpled again, "in the 'ousehold of Monsieur and Madame Richards there are many compensations."

"One compensation being our handsome chauffeur," Mrs. Richards teased. Her voice was muffled for she had moved over to peer into one of the drawers lining a large cupboard. "Ah, here it is!" she exclaimed and drew out a gold kid handbag. "This goes with the dress, Sara. I've got some shoes too, but I know they'd be too big for you."

"I have some gold evening shoes," Sara said quickly. "They're pretty and quite new."

"Good. Accessories are tremendously important and it would be a shame to spoil the whole effect for the sake of a little extra trouble."

Sara nodded. "Mme. Durack says accessories are one of the heaviest items in a model girl's budget."

By this time Lucille had finished tightening the waist and Sara stepped out of the dress and put on her own clothes again.

"Now I *do* feel like Cinderella!"

"Never mind," Mrs. Richards smiled. "Think how you're going to look the night of the ball."

"I am," Sara assured her. "Oh dear, does that sound awfully vain? Sometimes I think it must be wrong to care as much about clothes as I do." Twisting to make sure her petticoats were not showing below her skirt, she exclaimed: "Can you believe there isn't one full-length mirror in the whole of the hostel! You ought to have seen Matron's face when I was looking for one. Some people are awfully odd, aren't they, the way they seem to think wanting to look nice is some sort of crime."

"Sara," Mrs. Richards asked, "do you hate it very much at the hostel?"

"Heavens, I don't hate it. It's not like home, of course, but it's clean and the food's good and everyone's kind. Besides, it was the only way. Mummy wouldn't hear of my staying alone in digs. Anyway," she laughed, "one day I'll be a top model with a wonderful flat of my own."

"I'm sure you will. But you realise that may not be for quite a time?"

"Never mind. I've got lots of patience!"

"At least, you know we shall always be delighted to see you here, my dear."

"It's sweet of you to say that, Mrs. Richards, I don't know how to thank you properly."

"Don't try. Just remember it's lots of fun for me too, and let that satisfy you. And now, better run along to Marion before we have her accusing me of stealing her friend from her."

Sara found a tear-stained Marion lying sprawled on the

couch in her sitting-room, listening to Tchaikovsky and eating chocolates which she quickly thrust out of sight behind a cushion at the sound of the opening door. When she saw Sara was alone she switched off the record player and pulled out the box of chocolates again.

"What an idiot you are!" Sara cried despairingly. "Why on earth refuse that chocolate cake yesterday and then go and stuff yourself sick on these?"

Marion shrugged. "I don't want to eat when I'm with Babs and Frank. I only eat when I'm unhappy. Well, what's Mother been saying to you?" she asked suspiciously.

"Lots and lots," Sara admitted. "But very little that would interest you."

"I bet!" Marion said disbelievingly. "I expect she's been complaining to you about what a difficult child I am and how unhappy I make her. Oh yes, and about that terrible, fortune-hunting vet I've got a schoolgirl crush on."

"If you want to know, you hardly came into the conversation. Most of the time we were talking clothes."

"I'm sure you were!"

"But it's true," Sara cried, wondering how she could possibly make Marion accept it. "I'm sorry if it disappoints you."

"Disappoints me! How can you say such a horrid thing? I don't *want* Mother to say nasty things about me."

"If you don't, why do you always have to fight her?" Sara asked indignantly. "It was you who started it to-night, surely you can see that?"

"I should have guessed," Marion said in disgust. "Now Mother's got you on her side."

"I'm not on anyone's side," Sara said patiently. "I just don't like to see you and your mother quarrelling all the time. I don't think you know how to handle her at all."

"No, I leave that to you," Marion exclaimed sarcastically.

"Well, I get on all right with Mummy, and you couldn't find two more different people."

"We're not talking about *your* mother, Sara Gay. We're talking about mine. I heard your voices on the landing just now. What was she doing? Showing off Versailles to you!"

"Versailles? Oh, the bedroom," Sara explained as she caught on to Marion's reference. "Isn't it magnificent? I've never seen anything like it."

"No-one has!" Marion sneered.

"But Marion, it's beautiful," Sara protested in astonishment.

"I expect the original is. Goodness, Sara," she said with disgust, "I thought you had better taste. The bedroom's bad enough but as for the bathroom—that really is the end. She didn't show you Father's room, did she? That's a copy of a room in a seventeenth century Venetian palazzo. You can almost hear the water of the Grand Canal lapping away outside the window. The only thing they haven't imported is the smell! No wonder the wretched man spends most of his life at his office. Poor Mother," Marion laughed bitterly, "everything in this house just shrieks *nouveau riche* at you and all the servants snigger at her behind her back."

Sara looked at her friend incredulously. "I believe you're ashamed of your mother."

"That makes two of us! She's certainly ashamed of *me*."

"She's not, truly. She just thinks you should take more interest in the way you look."

"And you agree with her?"

Sara shrugged, annoyed by Marion's attitude. "If you want to know, I do rather. But whatever you like to think, your mother didn't ask me to persuade you to take more interest."

"You wouldn't get very far with me if you did."

"But why, for goodness sake? Marion, I don't understand. What are you trying to prove? You won't even have

your dresses altered to fit even though you've got someone as clever as Lucille in the house to do it for you!"

"Oh, so you met Mother's pet, did you? *'Oh, madame, is it not a shame your daughter should be so fat when you 'ave such a pretty figure,'*" Marion mimicked bitterly. "*'Oh, Mademoiselle Marion, you 'ave anuzzzer inch round zee 'ips since I last measure you!'*" Horrid, sneaky little beast. I won't let her near me." She shot Sara a suspicious glance. "What do you know about Lucille anyway?"

"Marion, look, this is a bit awkward." Sara swallowed. This was going to be even more difficult than she had imagined it would. "Your mother wants me to wear one of her dresses at the Passing Out parade and Lucille's taking it in for me. But I won't take it if you'd rather I didn't."

"Why on earth should it worry me? You surely don't think I care a rap about the Passing Out parade, do you?"

"I know you're dreading it."

"I'm not," came the retort. "For the simple reason that I'm not going to be there. I've made up my mind I'll hurt my ankle or pretend to be starting measles. Anything to get out of it. Wear what you like, Sara," she said indifferently, "it's of no interest to me."

"Oh dear," sighed Sara, wondering why life had to be so dreadfully complicated, "I was afraid you'd take it this way. I'd better wear my own dress after all."

Sara tried to speak cheerfully, yet much as she loved the simple white tulle dress her parents had bought her for her sixteenth birthday, now it would look like nothing at all compared with the magnificence of the gold brocade and satin.

"Sara, stop it," Marion cried, filled with sudden remorse as she read the disappointment on her friend's face. "Darling, I'm sorry. I'm selfish and horrid and I hate myself. Of course you must wear Mother's dress." She began to giggle. "Just think of the effect it will have on Lydia Durack and Nina when they see you in it." She paused,

astonished to find Sara still looking troubled. "Now what have I said? I want you to wear the dress. Honestly I do."

"Thanks, Marion," Sara said gratefully. "But there's something else. Do you know about the charity dance your mother is going to next Saturday?"

"Oh, that old thing. She's been on about it for weeks so I suppose I'll have to go. Mother's on dozens of committees with Lady This and the Countess of That. Dreadful old snobs, most of them. They're only interested in the money Mother gives in donations and they'd never dream of inviting her to meet them socially. But you can't get Mother to see it. Anyway, what about the dance?"

"Only that I'm invited to join your party," Sara said cautiously.

"But that's wonderful!" Marion cried. "Do come, Sara. If you're there I won't mind having to go half so much."

"You're quite sure? You see, the whole idea was that I should have another opportunity of wearing the dress."

"Wear anything you like," Marion laughed. "Come in a bikini! Why should I care? You can't help looking smashing any more than I can help looking a mess."

"Your trouble is, you want to look a mess," Sara told her severely. "And you won't mind if I stay overnight?"

"Of course not. It'll be fun. Did Mother say where you'd sleep? We can put a bed up in my room, or in here if you'd rather."

"Actually your mother said something about having the room next to yours."

"Next to mine?" The colour disappeared from Marion's face, leaving it so grey and pinched that Sara was startled.

"Marion! What's the matter? What have I said?"

Marion turned away, dejection in every line of her plump, ungainly body.

"Didn't Mother tell you?" she said tonelessly. "The room next to mine used to be my sister Eva's. And Mother has never let anyone sleep there since she died."

CHAPTER XIII

"DARLING, how good it is to be home again!"

Sara hurled herself up the garden path and into her mother's arms, and Mrs. Gay felt the tears come into her eyes as she looked lovingly down at the red-gold head resting on her shoulder. For a moment she held Sara close then recovering her normal manner, she pushed her away from her laughingly.

"My goodness, just look at our sophisticated model girl. Five days away from home and anyone would think it was five months."

The words were casual but the voice could not hide how moved she was. "All right," she joked, her eyes still misty, "let's see if they've managed to improve you."

"She looks just the same to me," complained Mr. Gay, who, together with Tony, had been at the station to meet her. "There I was looking for some exotic creature to come sweeping up the platform towards me, and all I could see was our Sara with a large smut on her nose."

"Daddy, I can't have," Sara cried in horror, "why ever didn't you tell me?" She ran to the mirror above the hall-stand and peered into it anxiously. "I haven't! Oh, it's too bad . ." She threw herself upon him and began to hammer at his chest in mock indignation. "I might have known you were teasing me."

"Ever been had!" chanted Tony. "Fancy falling for an old one like that. Girls are the stupidest creatures!"

"You keep out of it," Sara told him, gaily falling back into the feud that existed automatically between young brother and older sister. "It's certainly high time I came home. I can see you're getting really uppish without me around to keep you in order."

"Peace, peace," laughed Mr. Gay, seizing Sara and Tony and pretending to bang their heads together. "You make yourself useful, young man. Take your sister's case upstairs for her."

"Well, come on," Mrs. Gay said as Sara followed her into the small, bright kitchen. "I know you're dying to tell us about everything."

"There's so much to tell I don't know where to begin." Sara sniffed appreciatively at the smell of her mother's cooking.

"Good old Mummy," she thought, inspecting the stove and noting that her mother had prepared all her favourite dishes.

"It's wonderful to be home again," she sighed, and launched into an exuberant, non-stop account of her model school adventures that lasted well into the evening.

She had to start all over again the next day when she met Beryl at Hunters, the smartest store in Frimpton, for morning coffee. Beryl listened entranced to Sara's story of her first week in London.

"It's all too much for me to take in in one go," she confessed, her head spinning in the attempt to grasp everything Sara had to tell her. "Do you really like it though?"

"Like it! I adore it," Sara declared, her eyes sparkling with enthusiasm. "If it wasn't for Lydia Durack and her wretched niece, everything would be quite perfect."

"They sound real horrors," Beryl said sympathetically. "But you've made so many new friends I don't suppose you'll have much time for me in future."

"Beryl Thompson, how can you say such a thing?" Sara demanded indignantly. "You're my oldest and best friend and if you think I'm going to let new friends come between us, you can't have much of an opinion of me. You might as well say I won't have time for Mummy and Daddy and Tony."

"They're your family, so that's different. Besides, you'll be in London most of the time and I'm stuck here. It's terribly dull in the office without you there."

"That office." Sara shivered exaggeratedly. "I don't know how I stuck it for so long. Oh, look," she exclaimed as three girls in Autumn suits appeared at the far end of the restaurant and began to move down between the tables, "I didn't know they had models showing at Hunters."

"I think this is connected with a special Autumn fashion week they've been having. Anyway, I saw it advertised and thought it would make your morning if you could see models at work."

"How sweet of you. I wondered why you suggested meeting here instead of at our usual coffee bar."

Beryl watched the models open-mouthed. "I can't believe this could be you in a few weeks time. They're so poised and sure of themselves. Sort of remote, like goddesses. They make ordinary people like me feel all arms and legs and bulges."

"You ought to have seen our class the first morning," Sara told her. "More like a herd of elephants than goddesses. But it's amazing how quickly one begins to learn."

"I bet you were never like an elephant," Beryl protested. "Oh," she exclaimed as one of the models approached their table, "isn't the blue tweed a heavenly colour?"

"I prefer the grey flannel." Sara eyed the models critically. "Actually the blue is very pretty, but the grey would be far better for you."

Beryl sighed. "I can never tell what will suit me."

"That's everybody's trouble," Sara grinned, and paused to admire one of the models who was managing to hold her handbag and slip her coat back at the same time.

"That must take some doing," Sara whispered. "The other two aren't half so good at it."

"You seem to have learnt an awful lot already," Beryl said admiringly.

"Yes, but theory's one thing and practice is another. I haven't even got on to accessories yet, that's something in store for next week. I have a feeling gloves can be a great help—it gives you something to do with your hands—handbags and umbrellas can be an awful nuisance. I hate to think what a mess I'd make of it if I had to go and join them out there."

Beryl came home with Sara for lunch, and in the afternoon several friends and neighbours called round and were asked to stay for tea. It was not until after church on Sunday morning that Sara found the opportunity to speak to her parents about Mrs. Richards' invitation for the following weekend. To her relief no objections were raised, especially when she told them she would be spending the night at Marion's house.

However, when it came to the matter of dress, her mother's reaction was a decidedly unfavourable one.

"We'd never want to stand in your way," Mrs. Gay told her. "But however many grand new friends you make, and however good they are to you, don't let it go to your head. You've a perfectly good dress of your own and I don't see why you can't wear it."

"But you can't compare it with the gold satin," Sara protested.

"Maybe not. But who's asking you to compare it? Would you compare yourself with the Queen?"

"Now, Mother, what are you on about?" Mr. Gay said. "Don't start worrying the girl. All she wants to do is to

go to a dance and wear a different dress. There's surely no harm in that?"

"Not if she doesn't forget this is her family and this is where she belongs," Mrs. Gay said firmly. "High life's all very well for those who are born to it, but just because Sara's going to model expensive clothes for society ladies is no reason for her to start getting ideas."

"Mummy, as if I could. I like Mrs. Richards. She's been kind to me and she can teach me a lot about clothes. But no-one in their house is really happy—not the way we are—for all their money. I wouldn't want to be Marion, not for all the model clothes in the world, and I've told you Marion won't be happy until she can marry her vet and live above the shop."

"There, you see," Mr. Gay said comfortably. "Sara's a sensible girl and she's got her head well screwed on."

"She may be sensible, but she's also young. You tell Mrs. Richards from me we're delighted to let you go to this dance and grateful to her for putting you up for the night. But we don't want her to make a practice of giving you presents." Mrs. Gay relaxed. "Thank goodness I've got that off my chest! Now how about asking Marion to come and stay with us one weekend? You wouldn't mind her coming here, would you?"

Sara stared at her mother. "I'm sure she'd love to come. Why on earth shouldn't I want her to?"

"Because it'll be a bit different from what she's used to."

"Next you'll be suggesting I'm ashamed of my family." Sara flushed indignantly. "Marion's the one who's ashamed of her family—not me!"

Tears glittered in her eyes and, seeing them, Mrs. Gay was instantly contrite.

"I'm sorry, dear. I'd no right to say that. I should know my own daughter better than that. As for the dress," she began hesitantly. "It's just that I'm afraid of losin' ou."

"Losing me? But why ever should you lose me?"

"Well, once you've qualified you'll be living in London and growing apart from us. It's something that's bound to happen sooner or later."

"Mummy, no!" Sara flung her arms around her mother's neck, delighted to realise that what she had thought to be bad temper was only jealousy. "I'll never grow apart from any of you. I couldn't. I love you too much. And if you do see me getting swollen-headed or stuffy then for goodness sake knock me down to size!"

Mrs. Gay wiped her eyes unashamedly. "About that dress. . . ."

"It's all right," Sara said. "I'll tell Mrs. Richards I've changed my mind and I'd rather wear my own."

"You won't tell her any such thing. You say we're very happy to have you borrow it from time to time but we don't feel it right for you to accept such a valuable gift. If she's a sensible woman she'll understand."

"And here endeth the sermon," declared Mr. Gay, his eyes twinkling. "You got one from the pulpit and one from the settee. Bit much, isn't it, two sermons in one morning?"

"Hhm," snorted Mrs. Gay, pretending to be indignant. "The trouble with my family is that they're too soft by a long way. Goodness knows where any of you'd be without me to put my foot down about things." She reached for her apron and tied it around her waist in a decisive, no-nonsense sort of way. "See if young Tony's in the garden," she told her husband, "and if he is, tell him it's high time he came in and got washed. And you, Sara," she ordered, "you'd better come and give me a hand with the lunch. Seeing it's the butler's day off!"

CHAPTER XIV

SARA patted a stray curl into place, spread out her skirts and swept herself a low curtsy in front of the long mirror. "How I wish Mummy and Daddy could see me now," she thought involuntarily. Picking up the gold evening bag, she switched off the lights and stepped through the communicating door into Marion's bedroom.

Marion swung round her dressing-table. "You look magnificent," she cried in unalloyed delight as she took in the details of her friend's appearance.

Above the deep amber gold of the dress, Sara's delicate skin glowed creamy white, while the slender column of her neck was thrown into relief by the high medici collar of the coat. Her auburn curls, bound by a narrow golden fillet, had been piled high on her head in a style reminiscent of Greek vase paintings, and as she moved forward one ringlet danced against her cheek.

"Oh Marion, I'm so excited I can hardly breathe!"

"That's not excitement—that's too much dinner!"

"Somebody had to eat. I noticed you weren't eating at all. Whatever got into you?"

"I didn't dare," Marion confessed. "I was sure if I did I would never get this dress done up."

"And have you?"

"Just about," Marion laughed.

"Stand up and let me look at you properly," Sara urged.

"Who wants to look at me with you around?" Reluctantly Marion got up from the dressing-table. "Well?" she demanded, adopting an exaggerated pose.

"Don't be an idiot," Sara exclaimed. "You look jolly nice."

The soft draping of the sapphire blue chiffon skirt fell in gentle folds from a high Regency bodice of deeper blue velvet, the dark colour cleverly reduced her hips and waistline and yet drew attention to the unexpected grace of her shoulders and bosom.

"I'll pass in a crowd," Marion said drily.

"You'll do more than pass," Sara told her vigorously. "You look lovely." She gazed with astonishment at Marion's deep blue eyes shielded by long, thick lashes. "You have beautiful eyes, you know. I never realised they were so blue."

"I expect the dress brings out the colour. And anyway, I'm using blue eye shadow."

"You should always use eye make-up."

Marion shrugged. "The hair helps too, of course."

During the week the girls, as part of their course, had had their hair styled and set at André's Mayfair salon, and Marion's light brown, baby-soft hair, had been given body by a gentle perm, which lent height to her forehead and helped slim her plump cheeks.

Of all the girls, only Sara and Anne had been allowed to keep their shoulder length hair, and it had been amazing to observe how much difference a new, uncluttered hair-line had made to many of the girl's appearance. Sylvie, who had actually wept as her tangled black locks fell under the remorseless scissors, had emerged such an excitingly piquant *gamine* that Mrs. Lane had promptly sent her round to Lucien's studio for a special photographic session.

"Wouldn't it be too madly world-shaking," Diana had

drawled to an almost choleric Nina, "if our little model from wholesale were to end up a top cover girl!"

"Hair, face, and a dress that really fits for once," Sara exclaimed, bringing her mind back to the present. "Now I know how you can look when you try, Marion Richards, I intend to nag you remorselessly in future. Come on, let's go and show ourselves to your mother."

Fumbling nervously with the silver frame of her blue velvet evening bag, Marion followed Sara down the stairs to her mother's bedroom. The door was opened by Lucille.

"Alors! Regardez, madame. Les belles!"

"Sara, you look superb!" Taking her hand Mrs. Richards drew her into the centre of the room. "Stand under the light and let me see the full effect. Yes, that hair style is exquisite. How right of André not to cut it short."

"The minute he saw Sara he said it would be a crime to cut such wonderful hair," Marion said.

"Why, Marion!" Mrs. Richards gave a cry of pleasure as her gaze rested on her daughter standing hesitantly in the doorway. "How lovely you look, darling. Doesn't she look nice this evening, Lucille?"

Marion flushed self-consciously. "You don't have to sound quite so surprised about it, Mother."

"I 'ave always said, madame, for Mademoiselle Marion it is only necessary she take a little bothair and she could be *très gentille*."

"There, didn't I tell you?" Sara teased gently.

"Oh Sara, do shut up or I'll begin to be sorry I made the effort after all."

"But you *have* made it, darling," Mrs. Richards said fondly, "and it makes me very happy. There's only one thing lacking—no jewellery."

From her jewel box she selected a three-row necklace of creamy, graduated pearls which she fastened around her daughter's neck. "And now, what can we find for you, Sara?" From the cascade of gems she picked out twin

gold mesh bracelets. "Let's see how these look on you."

"They're perfect," Sara exclaimed, turning her wrists to admire the intricate workmanship.

"I thought they would suit you," Mrs. Richards turned to her daughter. "You'll find the little summer ermine cape on my bed. Bring it here and let's see how it looks with your dress. Very nice indeed," she approved as Sara arranged it around Marion's shoulders.

"Madame," Lucille urged, "you must hurry. Already it is late."

"Yes, of course." Throwing aside her lacy chiffon negligé, Mrs. Richards slid into the white and silver lamé gown Lucille held ready for her. "Tell me what you think," she demanded of the girls as Lucille's deft fingers coped with the intricate fastenings.

Sara saw a slim ankle-length dress cut with an uncompromising severity that ensured that nothing in the design would distract from the richness of the material. She took a deep breath as her first, momentary disappointment yielded to a growing wonder.

"It's not like looking at a dress," she said slowly, her face grave with the effort of comprehension, "it's the sort of feeling you get standing in front of a painting."

"What a lovely compliment. A really great dress can be a work of art." She clasped a diamond bracelet on her wrist and held up matching diamond drops to her ears to study the effect. "A dress like this is something only one of the very greatest designers could create."

"Someone greater than Tarquin?" Sara sought for confirmation.

"Balenciaga." Reverently Mrs. Richards named the austere Spanish designer. "Yes? No?" she queried, indicating the earrings.

"No, they're too much. Just the one bracelet," Sara advised with quiet confidence.

"Sara, how sure you are!" Mrs. Richards weighed the

diamonds in her hand thoughtfully. "It's true I'm often tempted to overdo things." Ruefully, she returned the earrings to their case. "All right, no earrings then, though it's strange how naked I feel without them." With a decisive movement she snapped shut the lock of her jewel case and handed it to Lucille. "Take this to Monsieur and ask him to put it in the safe."

"What fur will you wear?" Sara asked.

"It has its own." Reaching out for the superlative sable wrap with its lining matched to the dress, Mrs. Richards tossed it nonchalantly around her shoulders. Then she checked her hair, her make-up, her nail varnish and finally took up a large bottle of scent.

"Come and smell beautiful," she invited the girls and laughingly dabbed a touch of Joy behind their ears and at the bend of their wrists and elbows. "Never put scent on your clothes," she warned. "But I expect you already know that."

"I didn't," Sara confessed, "but I'll certainly remember it." She sniffed ecstatically at her wrists, breathing in the heady essence of the perfume. "Isn't it just *the* most heavenly smell ever?"

"It should be. It's the world's most expensive scent!"

Resplendent in white tie and tails, the inevitable cigar in his mouth, Mr. Richards appeared in search of his womenfolk. "Lucille tells me you've finished titivating yourselves. Heavens above," he broke off, appreciatively registering the impact of so much elegance. "What a roomful of glamour! I can see I'm going to feel like a sheik from one of those oil states arriving with his harem."

"Silly," Marion giggled. "If you were, we'd all be veiled and no-one would be able to see anything of us."

"This one must be a modern, progressive sheik who doesn't believe in purdah and comes bearing flowers for his ladies." With a flourish Mr. Richards produced three transparent florist's boxes from behind his back. "For the

lady in white, the lady in blue and the lady in gold," he said, handing round the carefully selected corsages with a pontifical air.

Her first orchid! Tingling with fresh excitement Sara drew out the exotic flower with its strange, subtle markings shading from cream to tawny gold and held it rapturously against her dress. Her forehead wrinkled as she concentrated on the problem of its placing. Here? Or here perhaps? Neither seemed entirely right. Then, in sudden inspiration, she fastened it securely in her hair where it sprang instantly into newly glowing life.

"Sara, whatever are you doing?" cried Marion pinning her own spray in conventional position on the bodice of her dress. "No-one wears orchids in their hair."

"I do," Sara laughed gaily and followed her host and hostess down the stairs and out to the car.

The ball was held in one of the more imposing of the London hotels and as their car swept along the embankment and stopped outside the brilliantly lighted entrance, Sara could not restrain a shiver of apprehension. How different this was from anything she had imagined! How unbelievable to think that she—unsophisticated Sara Gay—should be sweeping grandly into the flower-filled lobby of the Savoy Hotel! On all sides of her there were beautifully gowned women and distinguished looking men, while the air was filled with the heady scent of flowers and perfume.

Leaving their wraps in the cloakroom, they were escorted by Mr. Richards to their table in the ballroom. It was an excellent table in an excellent position, but the people occupying it were a great disappointment to Sara, for they were considerably older than she had imagined.

As if sensing what was going through her mind. Mrs. Richards glanced at her apologetically.

"They're my husband's business friends," she whispered, "but none of them have any children your own age. Still,

I'm sure we'll be able to introduce you to some young man before the evening is much older."

In this the woman was proved wrong, for all the young people at the ball already seemed to have partners. Not that Sara or Marion worried unduly. Indeed, Marion seemed strangely nervous and excited, and tell-tale colour kept coming and going in her cheeks. Sara on the other hand was content to watch the dancers and admire the dresses and jewellery.

A tall aristocratic-looking woman walked from table to table, and Mrs. Richards explained that it was Lady Wallington, Chairman of the Committee.

"She's very important," came the whispered explanation. "A charming person, but difficult to get to know."

"She's not difficult at all," Marion muttered into Sara's other ear. "It's just that Lady Wallington doesn't want to know Mother!"

"Shh!" Sara whispered fiercely and kicked her friend under the table. There were times when Marion's disloyalty was insufferable. Not that she could blame her friend for disliking her mother. There and then Sara vowed that if possible she would try and bring mother and daughter more closely together though she knew that to do so meant trying to reconcile Mrs. Richards to the fact that her daughter was in love with an impecunious young vet.

"May I have the pleasure of this dance?" a gruff voice broke into Sara's thoughts, and she looked up to see that the elderly man who had been sitting on Mr. Richards' left was looking her way.

Sara smiled and pushing back her chair preceded her escort to the floor. For the next half hour all the men at the table asked Sara and Marion to dance. Sara could not help wishing longingly for an extra pair of feet, for all her partners seemed extraordinarily clumsy. After one particularly exhausting Cha-Cha—which the middle-aged

partner insisted on performing as a rumba—she sank back exhausted in her seat and tried to look utterly spent. Anything so long as she could prevent any more of Mr. Richards' business guests from asking her to dance!

Her air of lethargy seemed to work for even when the music started again she was left alone to sip her champagne, which had now gone flat—like the ball.

"Having a good time?" Mrs. Richards murmured ineffectually before continuing her conversation with a full-looking woman on her right.

"Yes, thank you," Sara lied politely, massaging her bruised toes surreptitiously beneath the table.

The men were now discussing stocks and shares while the women were talking about their children and grandchildren. Hardly exciting conversation.

Sara sighed. What was the use of wearing the most beautiful dress she had ever possessed when there was no one to whom she could show it off? What was the point of having an orchid in her hair when there was no young man to hold her in his arms and touch his lips to it? How right Marion had been in warning her not to expect too much from the evening.

Marion! Suddenly Sara realised it was more than twenty minutes since she had last seen her.

The same thought struck her hostess, for Mrs. Richards turned and caught her arm.

"Do find out what's happened to Marion, my dear. Whenever things get dull for her she has a habit of disappearing into the cloakroom to pin up imaginary torn hems."

"I'll go and see if I can find her," Sara promised.

"Thank you, my dear. I know this dance must be awfully dull for you, but I'll have a word with Lady Wallington later on if I can. I'm sure there must be some young people to whom she can introduce you both. She's so busy though that I don't like to worry her . . ."

"Please don't bother about it. I'm having a lovely time just watching the dresses."

With a smile Sara excused herself from the table and went in search of her friend. She peered into the cloakroom and looked at the crowd around the tombola, but could see no sign of her. The only place left to look was the bar, and although it seemed unlikely that Marion would be there she decided to peep in. Turning abruptly she collided in the doorway with a striking-looking girl in a striped taffeta dress.

"I'm awfully sorry," she murmured and tried to side-step. As she did so she looked up, her embarrassment changing to astonishment as she recognised Frank's sister. "Babs! What on earth are you doing here?"

"At the moment I was coming in search of *you*," Babs laughed, "but you've saved me a journey. Come and join us."

"I was looking for Marion," Sara explained. "But if you were coming for me, that must mean she's with you."

"Of course she is. Where do you think Marion would be if not with Frank!"

"Hello there. How nice to see you again." Frank, larger than ever in his dinner jacket, detached himself from a starry-eyed Marion to seize Sara's hand in his remembered grip.

Marion smiled shamefacedly at her friend. "How awful of me to have deserted you. Babs was just going to find you."

"Well, well," Sara exclaimed, greatly amused. "Now I begin to understand!" No wonder, Marion had wanted to look nice for the dance. "I believe you knew all the time that Babs and Frank were going to be here tonight."

"I only knew two days ago though. It came out by accident."

"And you never breathed a word to me about it!" Sara

suddenly became anxious. "Your mother sent me to find you. What on earth shall I tell her?"

"Nothing. Anyway, you don't have to go back just yet. Not unless you're keen on another duty dance with Father or Mr. Hulton!"

"No thanks! You should have seen Mr. Hulton trying to do a samba just now. All the same, you'll have to do something. You can't hide from your mother all evening."

"We don't intend to. After all, Mother can hardly make a scene here so she'll just have to accept it. In any case, I'm sick to death of all this horrid secrecy business. If I can't make Mother see sense, then Frank says he's going to speak to Father. Anyway, we've both decided it's high time there was a showdown."

"Good for you," Sara exclaimed. "I'll have my fingers crossed for you."

Marion sighed. "If Mother would give herself a chance to know Frank I'm sure it would be all right."

Babs took Sara's arm. "Leave these two love-birds to themselves and come and meet some of our friends."

Sara followed her willingly. "You and Frank are the last two people I'd have expected to see at a ball like this."

"I don't mind putting on glad rags once in a while. Anyway, our aunt's on the Committee so we usually get roped in with her party each year. Besides, she always has a good crowd at her table. Come on and I'll introduce you to some of them."

She led Sara over to a lively group of young people standing together in a corner and from then on Sara did not have a moment of boredom. As the music struck up she was escorted into the ballroom and swung from one pair of arms to another. It was not until the supper break that she found herself back at the Richards' table.

"Have you found Marion?" Mrs. Richards asked. "I thought you were—" her voice died away as her daughter appeared at the table.

Marion was white-faced and trembling, but when she spoke her voice was firm. "Mother, I think you remember Frank Lacey. He's here tonight with his sister."

"Lacey? Lacey?" Mrs. Richards' eyes narrowed with annoyance. "Do you mean the young man from the pet shop?" She inclined her head stiffly towards him and pointedly turned her back on him. "Come and sit down, Marion. I promised Lady Wallington that you'd sell raffle tickets and when she came to look for you, you weren't here. It's too bad of you to be so rude to the Chairman—especially when you know how hard I work for the charity."

"I'm sorry Mother, but I was with Frank. Please be nice to him . . . for my sake. . . ."

Mrs. Richards kept her head turned away and Marion looked hopelessly at Frank.

He squeezed her hand reassuringly. "It's all right, darling. We don't want a scene now. Have supper with your mother and I'll come back to claim you when the dancing starts again."

The moment Frank Lacey was out of earshot Mrs. Richards turned on her daughter. "How many times do I have to tell you that you're not to see that young man any more? I can't imagine what a type like that is doing here. You stupid girl! How can I make you see what he's really after?"

"He's not after anything except me!" Marion said furiously. "And I won't let you talk about him like that. Frank and I—" she broke off as a large woman in a black spangled gown swept down on their table.

"My dear," she exclaimed excitedly to Mrs. Richards. "Something's gone wrong with the tombola rota. Do you think you could give me a hand after supper? You will? How kind of you." She sighed deeply. "Now I can begin to relax. And this is your daughter?" she went on, looking at Marion. "Of course, I remember. You're looking very

sweet tonight, my dear. Didn't I see you dancing with young Lacey just now? I must say I thought you made a charming couple." She rapped Mrs. Richards archly on the shoulder. "You're a deep one, I must say. Why didn't you tell us about it?"

"About what?" Mrs. Richards said blankly.

"Why, that your daughter was so friendly with our dear Chairman's nephew."

CHAPTER XV

AT last it was the day of the Passing Out Parade and even as one walked through the front door of the Lena Lane School, the tension could be felt.

By the time Sara arrived, the dressing-room was already crowded with excited girls in various stages of dress and undress. "This is it, Sara Gay," she told herself and her pulse quickened at the thought.

Everyone had been allocated their own chair and mirror and as Sara laid out her clothes and accessories in order of wearing, she knew a momentary longing for the peace of her own bedroom. Still, the cramped conditions in which she had to dress that afternoon were only a foretaste of all the over-crowded, chaotic dressing-rooms she was going to meet in her life as a model girl, she might as well start as she would be going on!

Outside she could hear the hum of voices, indicating that the studio was filling with parents and friends. How strange it would be to saunter along the cat-walk, the cynosure of all eyes—strange, critical eyes as well as loving family ones. Yet the only eyes that would have any bearing on her future were the keen ones of the Board of Directors who, with Mrs. Lane, would be occupying the front row, the better to see and judge and mark the papers in front of them.

Having changed into her blue suit which she was showing first, Sara hovered near the door of the dressing-room, keeping an eye out for her mother, when she saw Marion walk in with Mrs. Richards.

Since the night of the charity ball and the revelation of Frank's relationship with Lady Wallington, life had taken a wonderful new turn for her friend. At one moment Frank had been "most unsuitable", and at the next he had become "most eligible", while at the same time Marion had turned into her mother's blue-eyed darling who could do no wrong!

Marion had been quick to take advantage of her new position and had announced her desire to abandon the modelling course. Her mother had raised no objection, for after all, if Marion—dumpy, sweet Marion—had been able to entice one of the most eligible bachelors in Society—what was the point in her continuing on a modelling course which was only going to make her unhappy?

Sara could not help finding Mrs. Richards' snobbish attitude pathetic, though Marion and Frank found the situation amusing. In any case, they were sufficiently realistic to accept the change of attitude at its face value, and as Marion had explained to Sara:

"At least it's brought about a better understanding between Mother and myself. She's stopped picking on me and has accepted me for what I am. You've no idea how different the whole atmosphere is at home. Why, I've never been happier in my life!"

The other girls in the class had been incredulous when Sara had recounted Marion's story, and Anne had laughed so much that she had choked on her coffee and biscuit.

"Whoever would have dreamed Marion would be the one to end up marrying a title!"

"Frank hasn't got a title," Sara had objected. "And they're not going to get married for ages yet. Marion's

determined to be a vet, so I expect they'll have a long engagement."

"Do stop being so literal," Anne grumbled. "I think the whole thing's terribly romantic."

"What's romantic about a hard-up vet?" Nina had drawled. "His aunt might have a title, but it won't do *him* much good."

"Sour grapes," Anne said rudely, and the other girls echoed her sentiments.

Sara had wondered whether Marion would bother coming to the Passing Out Parade as a member of the audience, but in this she had underestimated Marion's friendship towards her, for that very morning she had received a telephone call saying that nothing would keep her and her mother away.

"I want to be there to clap when you walk on," she had said. "Besides, the judges will be awarding the Gold Medal and I know they take audience reaction into account."

"Don't clap too hard," Sara had giggled, "or it'll look phoney!"

"I won't clap at all," Marion had replied. "I'll merely stand up and cheer!"

Even as Sara remembered the conversation, she saw Marion wend her way past the rows of people towards the dressing-room. The moment she came in the other girls clustered round her, congratulating her on her future engagement and exclaiming how well she looked.

"Happiness is a much better tonic for me than all Mme. Durack's well-dispensed advice," Marion laughed gaily. "Do you know I've lost at least half a stone in the past week? Frank says I must be a compulsive eater—the sort who has to munch something when they're unhappy."

"I can see you living on air pies then," Anne exclaimed. "I wish happiness made *me* lose weight. The happier I am the more I want to stuff myself." She struggled frantically with the zip of her new brown and white jumper suit. "I

only bought this a week ago and I can't even do it up now."

"The skirt's not tight," Marion assured her as she helped her with it. "It's just a bad zip."

"Thank goodness for that." Anne breathed out cautiously and inspected herself in the mirror. "Thanks awfully, Marion. I'd never have been able to manage on my own." She swung round. "Why don't you stay out here and act as dresser during the show? I'm sure you don't really want to see us parading up and down like monkeys."

"Would you really like me to stay behind and help?"

"You'd be a godsend, wouldn't she, girls?"

The others immediately agreed and Marion stared in amazement, delighted at last to find herself accepted by her erstwhile class mates.

"I'll go and tell your mother you won't be back," Sara said, "and then I can have a word with Mummy at the same time."

She slipped out of the dressing-room and made her way down to the third row where Mrs. Richards was sitting. Her own mother had just come in and was standing by the entrance, an expression of embarrassment on her face which cleared the moment she saw Sara.

"I thought I was going to be late," she whispered. "The train kept stopping at all the junctions."

"We're nowhere near ready yet," Sara answered. "Come on over and I'll introduce you to Marion's mother."

Mrs. Gay was clearly a little discomforted by Mrs. Richards' elegance, but as they began to talk about their children and Sara's future in particular, she became more relaxed and soon they were chatting away like old friends.

Sara returned to the dressing-room and gave herself a final scrutiny, giving her hair a final flick though with a comb and dusting a little more powder on her nose.

Mme. Durack appeared in the doorway, superbly elegant in a severe black dress relieved by heavy ropes of pearls.

"Mrs. Lane and the Directors have already taken their places, so we'll begin at once."

As at the previous parade, when they had been the spectators instead of the stars, Lydia Durack was in charge of the commentary. "You are all quite certain of the order of appearance?" she went on, methodically checking the list she carried with the one pinned up behind the door.

The girls nodded nervously and one or two called out their numbers while Nina, exquisite in her printed silk two-piece with a deep-crowned hat and elbow length gloves, pushed her way through to the front.

Since the girls were showing their own clothes there could be no theme to the parade and to ensure complete fairness the order of showing had been decided by drawing numbers from a hat. In this instance Nina had drawn first place, which pleased her and satisfied the other girls, none of whom envied her having to make the first entrance.

"I see you are to go first, Nina," her aunt remarked with some anxiety. "You're not nervous?"

"Good heavens," Nina exclaimed scornfully. "What have I got to be nervous about?"

Mme. Durack gazed at her niece as she stood poised in the doorway, then she gave the signal for the parade to begin.

Watching Nina make her entrance, Sara was filled with dissatisfaction at her own appearance. Her blue suit, with its loose jacket and box-pleated skirt made her look a gangly, awkward schoolgirl. How could she dream of competing against the poised sophistication of a Nina Durack?

Having drawn one of the last numbers, most of the girls were back in the dressing-room and struggling with their next change before Sara had even made her first entrance, and waiting her turn to go on she saw Anne engaged in another wild wrestling match with her zipper.

"Take it back to the shop and get them to change it for you," some helpful type advised. "A stuck zip's a fate worse than death in this business."

"Well, I'm certainly fated," Anne groaned so comically that everyone round her began laughing.

"Sara, for goodness sake, it's your turn," Marion gasped, and pushed her still giggling friend out through the doorway.

Sara managed to recover her poise in time to make a reasonably smooth entrance but she had made the round of the studio and was half-way up the cat-walk before realising she still had a broad smile on her face.

"Whatever will people think?" she wondered desperately, "seeing a model grinning away like a Cheshire cat!" She struggled to compose her features but the laughter kept twitching at the corners of her mouth. "A giggling schoolkid, that's all you are," she told herself angrily, but all the time the laughter still threatened to bubble through.

Two turns along the cat-walk, pause, wait for the next girl to make her appearance before descending, slowly, slowly—then back inside the dressing-room and a mad race out of her suit and into an evening dress.

"Give me a hand, Marion," Sara implored as she scrambled wildly among the clothes laid out so carefully on her chair. "I can't see my bra anywhere."

"Your bra? But you're wearing it."

"Not this," Sara yelped frantically. "My strapless one. It's got to be here somewhere."

"Sara, for heaven's sake, get a move on." Jean—half-in, half-out of her three-piece beach outfit told her urgently.

Feverishly Sara put on her dress. She would just have to manage without a bra. Thank goodness the dress was well-boned. Perhaps with luck the missing bra would go undetected. Pray heaven the dress didn't fall down altogether! Desperately she fumbled with the microscopic

complications of the fastenings and pushed up her hair into the more sophisticated style the ball dress demanded.

Once more she was out in the studio and this time, to her great astonishment, her appearance won a round of applause. Of course, they were not clapping her, it must be the dress that was winning audience appreciation.

Out of the corner of her eye she saw Mrs. Richards lean forward and whisper something in Matthew Tarquin's ear. No doubt he would recognise his own dress and be wondering how on earth a little model student came to be showing it.

Back again in the chaos of the dressing-room the first thing to catch Sara's eye was her missing bra draped negligently across the back of her chair. "You clot," she thought, "it was there all the time!" But had it been there all the time? Sensing someone's glance she looked up swiftly to see Nina Durack watching her.

So that was it! Nina had hidden her bra. "What horrors the Duracks were," she thought with disgust. At least, it was some relief to know that after next week she need have nothing to fear from either of them.

Quickly she slid out of the magnificent evening gown and into a scanty white bikini. Then she perched an audacious scarlet bracelet on top of her red gold hair.

"You can't possibly wear that!" gasped a horrified Anne.

"Can't I?" Sara laughed, noticing with some amusement that Anne had limited her own beach outfit to shorts and a loose playshirt. "Just watch me," she declared and sauntered across to take up her stand by the door.

It was with a strange feeling of anti-climax that Sara returned to the dressing-room after her final showing. All the hopes and fears and expectations of the last few weeks focussed on this one great highlight, the Passing Out Parade. Now it had come and gone and the real, hard part of the fight for success lay ahead. Many of the girls must have been experiencing much the same feeling for there

was remarkably little chatter as they changed back into their street clothes and packed their things away into fashionable wicker baskets.

When everyone was ready they trooped out into the studio and sat at the base of the cat-walk as Lydia Durack had directed, feeling suddenly de-glamourised and ordinary.

Watching Mrs. Lane and her fellow-directors as they talked together, carefully assessing each girl's score, Sara was reminded of that other fateful day in her life when she had won the beauty contest. Then it had been a joke, but today her whole future hung on the outcome of the judges. Suppose she had failed to pass? Suppose, almost worse, she had scraped through with the bare minimum of marks that condemned an aspiring model girl to the second-best of wholesale houses, knitting patterns and cake-mix advertisements?

As Mrs. Lane rose to speak, the hum of conversation behind her faded. Her speech was short and direct and after a few general remarks she went on to say that that afternoon they had been fortunate to watch the debut of an outstandingly promising class of students.

"As everyone knows," she said, "we have a reputation for careful selection, and because of it we are rarely disappointed in our girls. But today we have even greater cause for pleasure, for every girl taking part in the Parade has passed with a good margin of marks. This means that they are all enrolled on the books of our Model Agency."

There was a burst of clapping and when it died away, Mrs. Lane's smile broadened.

"But something even more remarkable has occurred. In this one class *two* girls have reached a standard high enough to qualify for the rarely awarded Lena Lane Gold Medall"

A gasp went up from the girls at this announcement, and they looked at one another in excited speculation.

"This, of course, has led to certain difficulties," Mrs. Lane continued when the buzz of talk subsided. "In all the years since the award has been instituted, we have never before had more than one girl in any class gaining the necessary qualifying marks. But as I have just said, today there are two. In fairness, therefore, we have decided to institute a second award of the Lena Lane Silver Medal to go to the runner-up. And now," she said, a note of satisfaction in her voice, "It gives me great pleasure to announce that the Gold Medal goes to Sara Gay and the Silver Medal to the runner-up—Nina Durack."

Sara sat glued to her seat, unable to move as clapping and cheering broke out around her. Someone gave her a little push and somehow she found she was on her feet, stumbling, in a decidedly unmodel-like way, across the floor to shake hands with Mrs. Lane and the other members of the Board.

"Congratulations," the Principal murmured. "You've justified all my hopes."

Still in a daze, Sara went to find her mother, and Mrs. Gay hugged her close and tried to blink back the tears.

"You've certainly proved yourself this afternoon," she declared. "I'm so proud of you."

"I can't believe it's true," Sara gasped.

"It's no dream," Lena Lane's voice said behind her and with a little gasp of pleasure Sara turned to introduce the Principal to her mother. "What does it feel like to have such a clever model girl daughter?" Lena Lane asked.

"I can't think of Sara in those terms," Mrs. Gay replied. "To me she'll always be the same. And I'll do my best to make sure she doesn't alter either! There's no point in being conceited because you're pretty. After all, it's the way you're born, isn't it?"

Sara hid a smile. Trust her mother to cut her down to size.

"I wouldn't have put it quite that way," Mrs. Lane answered. "It takes more than a pretty face and figure to make a good model. A lot of hard work goes into it too, believe me. We try and impress on our girls that even when they've finished their training with us they're not all set for a life of glamour and ease. Far from it. A successful model has to work terribly hard and she's on duty all the time—whether she's working or not."

"I'm afraid I don't follow that," Mrs. Gay said with a smile.

"What I mean is that no matter whether she's in front of the cameras or in front of an audience," the Principal explained earnestly, "a model girl still has to maintain a high standard of grooming and a model way of life! Lots of sleep, plenty of fresh air and good food are the only way to ensure your looks don't fade."

"I'll endorse *that!*" Mrs. Gay answered. "Though I can't see Sara having much fresh air and good food if she has to live in London."

Mrs. Lane smiled and moved away to talk to some other parents and Mrs. Richards came up to take her place.

"I'm so happy for you," she gushed. "I feel just as if you were my own daughter. There'll be no stopping you now. You're going right to the top."

Sara felt swamped by so much praise and looked around desperately for Marion or one of the other girls. But even Marion, when she came to join them, was equally full of praise.

"I knew you'd win! I heard a lot of the audience saying it was because you looked so alive and happy."

Mrs. Richards nodded. "That's quite true. You had a wonderful smile on your face all the time."

"Pure nerves," Sara confessed.

"Well, you didn't look nervous," Mrs. Gay remarked. "Nor did that Nina Durack. She looked so stuck up I was itching to put her over my knee."

"That's a feeling we've all had," Marion said. "But you should listen to her now. Her nose is really out of joint because of Sara."

Immediately some of Sara's joy evaporated. "I can't bear to think of Nina being jealous of me. Do you think I should go and say something to her?"

"No," Marion said bluntly. "Whatever you say she'll think you're trying to be patronising. The best thing you can do is leave her alone."

"But I . . ."

"No," Marion said vehemently. "Leave her alone. She came right up to where I was sitting a moment ago and looked absolutely murderous. 'You tell your friend Sara Gay,' she said, 'that winning a Gold Medal is one thing, but *she's going to find it much more difficult getting a job!*'"

CHAPTER XVI

SARA spent the weekend floating on air and was still some three feet off the ground when she returned to the Model School the following Monday.

The moment she entered the building she sensed the tension, and a quick word with one of the girls gave her the reason; Mrs. Lane had been rushed to hospital with an unidentified virus infection and Lydia Durack was having to cope alone with the new intake of students as well as enroll the old class on the Agency books.

"I cannot do it by myself," the woman suddenly exclaimed, glancing at her watch. "Each girl's particulars take half an hour to write down, and at this rate I won't ever *see* the new class. Polly!" she ordered, "you must do it for me."

"But I've got all the bills and letters to do," Polly protested.

"Leave them till later," Lydia Durack said and walked out.

Muttering crossly under her breath, Polly set to work. A file had been opened for each of the new models, listing her height, colouring, statistics, and passing out marks, and attached to this file was the set of photographs everyone had taken at Lucien's studio the previous week.

When it came to Sara's file however, Polly was dismayed

to find the envelope containing both prints and negative had vanished. A desperate search in which everyone joined enthusiastically—thus adding to the general chaos of the morning—failed to yield up any sign of them, and at lunchtime, when Mme. Durack returned to her office, Polly had no alternative but to report their disappearance.

Lydia Durack clutched her head distractedly. "Of all days for this to happen. Are you quite certain?"

"I've looked everywhere," Polly assured her. "I've been through every file and all the others are there. Sara's envelope is the only one missing."

"So? It would have to be Sara," Lydia Durack remarked bitterly.

"What shall I do? You know Mrs. Lane always likes to get the photographs sent out to the dress houses as soon as possible."

"Lucien will have to take another set for us. There is no help for it," Lydia Durack sighed wearily. "That is not exactly going to please him. Heavens above, if there is anything I am not in the mood for today it is Lucien's tantrums. Well, delay will not help us. Get on to him at once and explain the urgency. Tell him—No," she broke off, snatching the receiver as Polly began speaking to the photographer, "give it to me. I will speak to him myself."

"It is fixed up," she exclaimed a few minutes later, walking into the outer office where Sara was waiting dejectedly. "If we are there in ten minutes, Lucien will take them for us right away. Hurry now, I have the car outside. I'll run you there myself."

"But Mme. Durack . . ." Sara began, trying to explain that she must first fetch her case from upstairs.

"No talking!" the woman said imperiously, waving her hand to command silence. "This is no time for argument." She hustled Sara out of the front door and down the steps. "If we do not hurry how can you be back in time for the Parade this afternoon? And think what a disappointment

it would be for the new students," she said sarcastically, "if our latest gold medallist should be missing from the Parade!"

Sara scrambled hurriedly into Lydia's car. "I hope you don't feel too badly about—about—" she swallowed, feeling herself flushing scarlet. "Well, I mean, I hope you don't mind my winning the gold medal instead of Nina."

Her face set, her body tensed over the wheel, Lydia Durack wove her high-powered sports car skilfully through the crowded Mayfair side-streets. "You won it, Sara," she said harshly. "That I think should satisfy you."

"But I can't help feeling badly about it," Sara stammered. "I know Nina expected to win it."

"Nina also expected to win the scholarship," came the answer. "Let us say it was bad luck for my niece the day you walked into Mrs. Lane's office."

"But you do see it isn't my fault, don't you, Mme. Durack?"

"Certainly it is not your fault. It is only Nina's misfortune. And now," the woman said, her voice icy, "if you are quite finished, I suggest we change the subject."

"Well, at least I tried," Sara told herself and relapsed into uncomfortable silence.

Lucien greeted them petulantly and led them into the studio with its cameras and arc lights and tangle of electric cable trailing its way along the floor.

"This is all most inconvenient," he declared in the tones of a spoilt child. "The least you can do with photographs is to look after them, surely? I've five appointments already this afternoon, and this makes a sixth. And just today when my assistant is on an out of town job. How does anyone expect me to do good work under such conditions?"

"I'm sorry, Lucien. It is even more inconvenient for me today than it is for you. Mrs. Lane is ill and we are in a state of chaos."

Lucien shrugged and picked up some sandwiches lying on a small table. "Have you eaten?" he demanded.

"No."

"Then you'd better have some of mine." He stuffed some smoked salmon into his mouth and passed some over to Lydia. "Rush, rush, rush," he groaned. "Sometimes I wonder if any of this is worth it. Well, get a move on, young woman," he snapped to Sara. What are you standing around for? Get dressed and made up. I'm not expected to take you in a sweater and skirt, am I?"

"For goodness sake, girl, what are you waiting for?" Lydia Durack expostulated.

"But Mme. Durack, I haven't got my case with me."

"You haven't" Lydia Durack flung up her hands in despair. "These girls, Lucien, what can one do with them? Models they call themselves! How many times a day have I told these children that no model moves two inches without taking her make-up and accessories with her. If this was a job you were on, Sara, you would be through! Finished! Washed up! That I can assure you."

"But I tried to tell you," Sara began, endeavouring to remind the woman that she had rushed her out of the office without allowing her to collect her case from the dressing-room.

"Excuses, excuses," Lydia cried, waving aside Sara's explanation. "I am sick of excuses! Lucien, listen to me, somewhere you must have props. See if you can find something for this little idiot to wear."

Thoroughly disgruntled, the photographer rummaged in a dusty, overcrowded cupboard, emerging with a property basket packed with draggled looking garments.

"What is this, cast-offs from a jumble sale?" Lydia Durack demanded, picking over the contents with fastidious finger-tips. Eventually she pulled out a low-cut black satin dinner dress and some heavy paste jewellery

which she tossed across to Sara. "Where can she change?"

Lucien stopped fixing his arc lights long enough to jerk a negligent thumb in the direction of some screens. "Behind there," he said in a bored voice, and Sara found herself bundled behind the screens and hurried out of her clothes and into the evening dress by an implacable Lydia.

"But it doesn't even fit. It's miles too big," Sara protested, squinting down at the dress which smelt of stale perspiration.

"Too big, is it?" Milling around in the prop basket, Lydia came up with a handful of clothes which she proceeded to fasten down the back of the dress to take up the slack. "The oldest trick in the photographic business," she assured Sara. "And this is the second oldest," she asserted, padding out the cups of Sara's brassière with cotton wool.

"Surely that's going to make me stand out too much?" Sara exclaimed, craning her neck in an attempt to get a view of herself.

"Stupid! The dress has to fit, hasn't it? Stand still, child," she snapped, "how can I do your hair if you insist on wriggling?" With quick fingers she dragged a comb through Sara's curls and twisted them back from her face with hairpins taken from her own chignon. "Lucien, do you have some make-up?"

"In the cupboard," he said wearily.

Lydia unearthed the make-up box and brought it to Sara. "Sit down here under this light and I'll make you up myself."

"Isn't there a mirror anywhere?" Sara asked anxiously as the woman went to work with the panstick and eye-shadow.

"A mirror? What do you want with a mirror? I am doing my best for you, can't you see that? How long do you think you would have taken without my assistance? There, it is finished," she declared, blotting Sara's lips with tissue and fastening on the heavy paste necklace and earrings. "Yes,

that should do it, I think," she murmured to herself. "Right, Lucien. We are ready for you."

"Very sophisticated," the photographer muttered abstractedly, throwing no more than a cursory glance in Sara's direction. "Stand there," he instructed, and pointed to a plaster tree.

In a quarter of an hour it was over and Sara was struggling back into her own clothes and wiping the heavy make-up from her face with the cold cream and tissues Lydia Durack held out to her. Somewhere at the back of Sara's mind came the uneasy thought that her make-up had been much lighter the previous time she had had her photographs taken in this studio.

"Will you have them ready by tomorrow?" Lydia asked on her way out.

"Wednesday," the photographer replied.

"It is too late. I must have them by tomorrow."

"All right, tomorrow. Anything you say," he groaned, mopping his forehead and groping for a sandwich.

"If the photographs are ready by tomorrow, it should be possible to have them distributed by Wednesday," Lydia Durack remarked as they drove back to Victoria.

Sara realised a whole week might have been lost before the new photographs were taken and printed if Lydia Durack had not acted so promptly on her behalf. A whole wasted week in which there would have been no possibility of finding modelling work. Surely she should be feeling grateful instead of uneasy?

"You've gone to an awful lot of trouble for me," Sara said, hoping she did not sound grudging. How difficult it was to accept favours gracefully from people one disliked! "I wish I knew how I could thank you properly."

"It is my job," Lydia Durack said coldly. "Do you think I can forget, Sara, that you are Mrs. Lane's prize pupil?"

Back at the School Mrs. Lane's prize pupil found herself with little time to spare before the afternoon show. By

now she was starving, for it had occurred to no-one to offer her any of the sandwiches which the photographer had shared with Lydia Durack. But even more than food she longed for a bath after the heat of the arc lamps and contact with the musty dress she had been forced to wear for the photographic session.

Denied a bath, she had to content herself with a thorough wash in the crowded cloakroom before getting down to the long, careful job of making-up. As she worked on her face, new doubts collected at the back of her mind. If only she had been given time to collect her own clothes for the photographic session; if only there had been a mirror where she could have seen the finished result after Lydia Durack had worked on her . . . "Well," she thought, consoling herself, "at least Lucien did say I looked sophisticated!"

That afternoon the show went smoothly. By now it had become almost routine and the girls felt surprisingly professional as they paraded for the benefit of the new students.

"Gosh," Anne chuckled as they came off for the last time, "to think it was only three weeks ago that we looked as much of a mess as that lot out there. And now look at us!" She postured exaggeratedly. "Transformation scene in three acts. Wave a magic wand and, hey presto, ugly ducklings into swans!"

Lydia Durack, coming into the dressing-room at that moment, overheard her remark and allowed herself a brittle laugh.

"Hard work, Anne, not a magic wand. Oh yes, you think I am a hard taskmaster, you girls. No, do not deny it, I know very well what you think. Mrs. Lane, she is sweet and kind, but me—I am considered a sour old martinet!"

"But if I was not, how do you think I would obtain results? From this to this." She waved an expressive hand, first in the direction of the studio where the new students

were sitting, and then around the crowd of newly qualified models. "You know what I am," she told them bitterly, "I am like a sergeant major. I have the new recruits, awkward and slow, all arms and legs and dirty shoes and hair down to the collar, and in a few weeks only, I must turn out a line of well-groomed, beautifully drilled guardsmen. And when it is done," she sighed, "then I must begin all over again with the next lot."

Several of the girls turned their heads to hide a smile. A sergeant major was an all too apt description of Lydia Durack. But despite herself, Sara could not help feeling a little sorry for the woman. If she had not had the bad luck to interfere with her plans for Nina and so arouse her malice, Sara supposed she might even have come to admire her. After all, she *was* a good teacher, and when you thought about it, it was an unrewarding job to teach other girls to be models when you had once been a top model yourself, as rumour declared Lydia to have been. She shot a quick glance across at Nina, curious to see how the girl had reacted to her aunt's outburst, but Nina only tossed her head and turned away ostentatiously.

"All right," Sara decided, "let her sulk if she wants to. It's not my fault the judges gave me the medal." One good thing, once this afternoon was over, she and Nina would have seen the last of each other.

Later in the week she said as much to Jean and Anne over a cup of tea, but Jean did not altogether agree.

"The fashion world is an awfully small one," she warned. "You'll both be using the Lena Lane Agency and later on you may find yourself working on the same job with her."

"Heaven forbid!" Sara exclaimed with such feeling that Anne choked on a meringue.

"Anne, grow up, can't you?" Jean groaned.

"I don't *feel* grown-up," Anne objected.

"You can say that again. You ought to be modelling gym

slips. The way you act, anyone would think you were still pining for the Upper Fifth!"

"The Lower Sixth," Anne contradicted. "I'd just scraped through my 'O' levels and it was the happiest year of my life."

"She means it too," Jean confided darkly to Sara. "How retarded can you get?"

"Listen to grandma," Anne exclaimed without rancour. "Wouldn't you know she'd just landed her first job?"

"You haven't!" Sara seized Jean's hand and pumped it enthusiastically "Where?" she demanded "Why? When? You wretch, fancy holding out on me this way."

"It's nothing to write home about. It's in a wholesale house making medium-priced dresses. Hard work and good honest experience. After six months I may try my hand at freelancing. Then, when I've saved some cash I'm going to try my luck in Paris!"

"Paris!" Sara exclaimed.

"Yes, that's my deep-down ambition. Haute couture. It's different for you, I'm certain you could land a job in one of the top model houses right now."

"Wholesale or not, I think it's exciting," Sara declared. "Just imagine, this time next week you'll actually be working."

"But I'm not the only one," Jean said. "Quite a few of the girls have already got jobs."

"That's right," Anne confirmed. "Sylvie's starting in wholesale too and Honey Wei's got a job with Harrods."

"It seems awfully quick," said Sara in some surprise.

"Not really. Our photographs were sent out a week ago, after all. That wretched business with *your* photographs would have held things up for you at least a day or two."

"Yes, that must be it," Sara said doubtfully. "Anyway, I'm told they've been sent out now. When did you get all this news?" she asked.

"About the girls? This morning when I went to the

School, the Agency, I mean," Anne corrected herself quickly.

"Honestly," Jean said indignantly, "I'm petrified to go near the place now unless I'm dressed to kill. All that nonsense about never going up to see them unless we're looking one hundred per cent the model girl or we may find ourselves struck off the books. What on earth's it got to do with them if we *have* got a laddered stocking or our shoes need repairing?"

"A lot," Sara said. "After all, they're responsible for recommending us and how long will they want to do that if we turn up each time looking like scruffs? We can always *ring* up and ask about jobs. At least with the telephone, no-one can see if your nose is shiny!"

Jean giggled. "As a matter of fact though, that's one reason I'm glad I'm starting work next week. I like to know I can afford nylons and shoes and hairdressing and the rest. It's all very well for someone like Diana to decide to freelance, but it's not so easy for most of us. Though I still say you were a bit hasty, Anne, turning down that photographic job the way you did."

"You did what?" Sara gasped.

"They wanted me to model undies," Anne exploded disgustedly. "Bras and roll-ons and things. I said I was sorry but they could keep it. Diana's doing some ski clothes tomorrow, and that's something I wouldn't have minded. But emphatically not undies!"

Anne and Jean began to discuss the various jobs which the other girls had obtained and Sara found she was gripping her hands tightly together, beneath the table.

"What about Nina?" she asked, trying to make her voice sound indifferent.

"Oh, according to her, she's been offered a job by everyone from Hartnell to Dior! It's simply a question of whom she decides to honour! Actually," Jean said, "I got the impression she was freelancing until something really

plushy in *haute couture* turned up. But I could always be wrong."

"Why should you be wrong?" Sara asked, and her voice was so strange that both her friends stared at her with sudden concern.

"What's up?" Anne asked.

Sara shook her head in a bewildered sort of way. "Nothing. I—I want to make a phone call."

She left the table and a few minutes later returned, her face unnaturally pale.

She said defiantly: "I've just been speaking to Polly. My pictures were sent out five days ago and there hasn't been one single enquiry." She swallowed and attempted a strained gaiety. "It's quite a laugh in a way. All the class have already been fixed up with jobs, and so far nobody's even *wanted to see me*."

CHAPTER XVII

"I DO wish I could make you change your mind about coming to live with us," Mrs. Richards said.

Another week had come round and Sara, still without a job, was having lunch with Marion and her mother.

"Yes, Sara, why don't you?" Marion joined her appeal to her mother's. "There's stacks of room here and it'd be fun."

Sara laid down her knife and fork and let her gaze wander around the dining-room, appreciating the Hepplewhite furniture and rich Aubusson carpet, the gleam and sparkle of silver and cut glass. She thought of Marion's exquisite bedroom and its adjoining replica which could be hers for the asking, and compared it with the narrow hostel cubicle which was her only home from Monday to Friday.

She had spent the prize money she had won at the beauty contest and for the past week had been drawing on her post office savings for rent and fares and food. Even by cutting down on meals, she had only enough to last one more frugal week in London, and after that there was no choice but an ignominious return to Frimpton! She had found it impossible to get even a temporary office job in London to tide her over the bleak time before work came along, for no Secretarial Bureau would consider taking a

would-be model girl. Model girls, like actresses, she was told, were not considered reliable. A telephone call—and your temporary secretary was charging off to an audition! It was no help in such a depressing situation to have Mrs. Richards offer this tantalising invitation.

"It's wonderful of you," Sara said wistfully, "but it wouldn't be right. If I can't stand on my own feet then I'll go home again."

"What will you do in Frimpton?" Marion asked.

"See if Mr. Dunn will take me back," came the bleak reply; even the thought of Mr. Dunn's office was like prison. "I don't expect he will," Sara went on, "the new girl he has now is much better than I ever was. Still, I dare say I can find another job like it. I may not be much of a typist, but I make an awfully good cup of teal"

"It seems such a dreadful waste," Mrs. Richards sighed.

Sara shook her head despondently. "If I was any good I'd have heard something by now. Every one of the other girls are working."

"It doesn't make any sense. After all, *you* won the medal and the scholarship."

Sara had been over the same ground so many times that she could not even bear to talk about it.

"If I was any good something would have come along by now," she reiterated. "It's like school, I suppose. It's not always the people who are good at exams who make the most headway when they leave."

"Why don't you go and see Matthew Tarquin?" Mrs. Richards suggested. "I'm sure he'd help. If you like, I'll make an appointment for you?"

"We're not allowed to get a job that way," Sara explained. "If Mr. Tarquin wanted to see me, he could have got in touch with the Agency."

"When did you go up there last to enquire?"

"A few days ago. Mrs. Lane's still away, but I talk to Polly every morning on the telephone."

Sara forbore to add that the real reason she did not go to the Agency every day was that she only wanted to put in an appearance when she was looking her best, and her most careful budgeting still only enabled her to visit the hairdresser every ten days.

Lunch over, Sara walked with Marion as far as the pet shop, where she helped every day while waiting for a vacancy at the Veterinary College.

"It doesn't seem fair," Marion said sadly, "I'm on top of the world, and you're down in the dumps. Why not stay and help us this afternoon?"

"I'm too restless. I'll go for a walk and try and sort things out."

"If I were you, I'd go and talk to Polly. Someone may even ring up for a model while you're sitting there!"

Marion's words had such effect that Sara walked straight to the nearest hairdresser's and, two hours later, washed, changed, made-up and wearing her last pair of unladdered nylons, she was sitting in Polly's cubby-hole.

"If only Mrs. Lane was here," Polly sighed, "I'm sure she'd be able to help you. But she won't be back for another few days."

"I hope I can last out till then," Sara said and realised how much easier it was to discuss money difficulties with someone like Polly who could understand, than it was with Marion and her mother.

"I'd take *anything*," she said desperately. "Wholesale, knitting patterns, anything just as long as I'm working."

"But I've tried them too. Didn't you realise? I started out with only haute couture, the way I always do with our gold medallists, but when nothing materialised I tried everyone else."

"Maybe I'm too young," Sara sighed. "I expect they take one look at my picture and start asking why I'm not still at school or something."

"Not unless they're blind!" Polly chuckled, and reaching

into Sara's file, pulled out an envelope. "Here, take a decco for yourself. You never did see the new shots, did you?"

Sara took the pictures and goggled at them in amazement. "That's never me!"

"It's what it says, lovey." Turning them over, Polly read out the attached sticker. "*Lena Lane Agency. Sara Gay: Height 5ft. 7ins.; Weight, 110 lbs; Hair, red-gold; Eyes, hazel; Vital statistics, 34-21-35. If that's not you, who is it then?*"

"At a rough guess I'd say some cheap starlet—vintage 1930!"

"Take it easy, old girl." Polly reversed the photograph and studied it carefully. "I rather like these. Sort of sophisticated, wouldn't you say?"

"You bet I'd say! Have you ever looked up 'sophisticated' in a dictionary? It means artificial, adulterated, tampered with!" Sara's eyes sparked green and the words tumbled out in a crescendo of fury. "It's Lydia Durack's fault," she raged. "No wonder she wouldn't let me look in a mirror that day at the studio. And I thought she was being kind. Kind! It wouldn't surprise me if she hadn't deliberately 'lost' my photos in the first place."

"What are you going to do?" asked the awestruck Polly.

"I'm going right over to see Mrs. Lane and ask her what *she* thinks of these photos."

"But you can't. She's still ill."

"She'll be even worse when I tell her what Lydia Durack's been up to. And I'm going to tell her everything! How she made me late for the Board Meeting that very first day. How she's been—"

"She made you late for the Board Meeting?" demanded Polly incredulously. She stared at Sara and came to an abrupt decision. "You can have Mrs. Lane's address. I don't care if I get the sack for giving it to you, but you're right, Sara. It's time someone stopped Lydia Durack getting away with it."

Address in pocket and photographs in hand, Sara strode out through the front door and cannoned straight into the arms of a tousle-haired young man with a small beard who was charging up the steps three at a time. Thrown off balance, her heel caught in the ragged edge of the door mat and she would have gone pitching down the stairs if the man had not jettisoned the parcel he was carrying, and managed to catch her in a flying rugger tackle. Winded but unhurt, she sat on the doorstep and stared in dismay at her ruined nylons.

"I'm terribly sorry," the young man said. "Are you all right?"

"These," said Sara furiously, "were my last good pair of stockings!"

"I'll buy you another pair."

"You'll do nothing of the sort. I buy my own stockings, thank you very much." With immense dignity Sara picked herself up and gingerly tested her heels to make certain they had not been broken.

The young man eyed her with open admiration. "I think model girls are wonderful," he declared. "You can half kill them and the only thing they worry about are their heels, their nylons and their hairdo's!"

He bent to retrieve his parcel and at the same time picked up Sara's scattered photographs. He started to put them in their envelope and had half done so when he gave an exclamation of amazement.

"Good Lord! Don't tell me these are supposed to be *you!*"

"So I'm told."

"But they're ridiculous. What are you pretending to be—Heroine of the Harem or Love in the Casbah!" He looked at the back of the photographs and burst out laughing. "Oh no! Don't tell me Lucien took them? Not the great man himself!"

"You've heard of him then?"

"Heard of him? Honey, I work for him! Look," the young man said, pushing a lock of light brown hair out of his eyes, "hang on a moment while I drop my prints in to Polly. I want to talk to you."

Some half hour later Sara was in a Chelsea coffee bar sitting opposite to the young man whose name, she had learned, was Peter Redgrave. Over their cappuccinos he listened attentively as she told him the story of the second batch of photographs and when she had finished he got up, still without comment, fed some coins into the juke box and came back to the table.

"Mood music," he told her, thoughtfully fingering his chin with its embryonic wisp of beard which, Sara decided, only made his undistinguished young features younger and more undistinguished than ever. "I find it helps me concentrate," he murmured. "What's your reaction?"

"I've never given it much thought."

"Well, I have. I like having background music when I'm working. I find it helps the sitter to relax. Lucien doesn't agree, but then he doesn't agree with most of my ideas." He took up Sara's photographs and stared at them disgustedly. "Mind you, he's good in his own way. But his stuff's too stagey for me. Everything posed and remote and bags of pedestals and urns of flowers. Even so I don't know how Lucien could have perpetrated *this*." He flicked an expressive finger-nail against the offending prints.

"He was in an awful rush," Sara explained, "and furious at having to take them again. Anyway, he was photographing me the way I was. And by the time Lydia Durack had finished with me I suppose I *did* look like that."

"You've really got it in for her, haven't you?" Peter grinned.

"She's had it in for me ever since I started at the school. I'm fed up with it."

"Beautiful cats with long, sharp claws," Peter said. "Watch out, Sara, you're going to find the fashion world full of them. Lydia Durack's just a foretaste. I admit it comes hard on kittens like you."

"Kittens grow up," said Sara.

"That's the pity of it. And sometimes they grow claws themselves. Promise you won't do that?"

"I don't think I'd know how. But at least I won't be quite so green again." She sighed. "The trouble is that I can't get a job."

"With these pictures going the rounds it's no wonder nobody wants to employ you. You'd have got a job all right with the first lot Lucien took of you. They were ordinary, but nice."

"How do you mean by ordinary?" Sara asked.

"Oh, just like any other beautiful, artificial-looking model."

"How would *you* photograph me then?"

"As a flesh-and-blood girl. Someone one can have fun with, not some remote, fragile clothes-horse." As he spoke Sara was amazed to see his face come to life and develop force and character.

"Lucien will never let me try it that way, of course," he went on. "He makes me take the same artificial pictures he's been taking so successfully for years. Success! Honestly, Sara, sometimes I think it's the worst thing that can happen to people. I get so bored and frustrated sometimes. Ideas are changing, and Lucien can't see it. I'm positive that candid, natural photographs can be equally as glamorous as artificial ones. More glamorous even." He gesticulated hopelessly. "How can I make you understand?"

"But I do understand," Sara said excitedly. "It's as if I had to model for some designer who went on turning out the same dreary old styles year after year."

"That's it exactly!" His grey eyes, small and deep set,

glinted with excitement. "Damn it, Sara, I've just had an absolutely wonderful idea. Come and have dinner with me and I'll tell you what it is."

Peter took Sara to a small but authentic Italian restaurant, where she received her first introduction to spaghetti. She was quick to learn how to eat it, and Peter soon had her twirling the long strands of pasta around her fork as if she had been doing it all her life.

"Enjoying it?" he asked.

"Who wouldn't?" She sighed ecstatically. "It's all so foreign and exciting."

He looked at her with interest, delighted to see how keen she was to sample anything new. So many girls were timid, distrusting the strange and clinging to the familiar. Sara was different; expectant, unafraid, reaching out eager for life. It was this quality which he longed to reveal through the medium of his camera.

"Listen," he said urgently. "You realise you're going to need new photographs before you can hope to find a job?"

"I know. That's why I want to see Mrs. Lane."

"But that'll take so long! First you'll have to tell her the whole story, then she'll have to speak to Lucien—tactfully too, because you said yourself how mad he was at having to take you again, and by the time he's agreed to do it once more another two weeks will have gone by."

"Peter Redgrave," Sara said, setting down her fork, "here I am, having a wonderful time, and you have to start depressing me!"

"But I don't want to depress you. I want to help you. Why not let *me* photograph you? Let me show you to people the way *I* see you. If they turn out badly we'll tear them up and forget them and you won't have lost anything. On the other hand, if you like them, you'll have saved at least a week and I'll have proved my theory."

"I can't let you take my photographs, Peter. I haven't any money."

Peter burst out laughing. "Models don't pay to have their photographs taken. They *get* paid. That's my trouble. Photographic modelling is the highest paid side of the business and I can't afford to hire models to test out my theory. So you see, if you let me use you as a model, you'll be doing me a favour."

Sara thought about it. "Suppose we call it a mutual favour?" she suggested.

"You agree then? That's wonderful!"

But while it was one thing to agree to Peter's scheme in the bright lights of a crowded restaurant, it was another to carry it through the dark, dismal atmosphere of a rainy evening.

Standing on the pavement outside Lucien's studio, clutching the wicker case which they had collected from her hostel, the first doubts began to assail her.

"I feel exactly like a burglar," she whispered.

"I don't mind what you feel like, as long as you don't *look* like one!" Peter whispered back. "There's a policeman on the corner, and I'd hate him to get the wrong idea. In any case," he added crossly, "it can't be burglary when I've got the keys and it's where I work!"

Sara bit back her impulse to tell him that he was only playing with words for neither of them had any right to be in Lucien's studio after working hours. But having committed herself to a project, however harebrained, it was not in her nature to back out at the last minute.

Peter unlocked the door, drew her inside and locked it again. "Hang on a moment while I see to the lights."

He threw over the switch of the control box that operated the studio lights and led her through the office and down the stairs to the basement.

"Spooky, isn't it?" he said disconcertingly.

Sara knew that when all the arc lights were on the basement would be bright as day, brighter in fact, but now, with the dim light of a couple of dusty 40-watt ceiling

bulbs throwing strange, odd shadows, spooky was undoubtedly the right word.

She shivered involuntarily, then chided herself for her childish fear of the dark. Pushing aside those fears she unfastened her case and drew out the dresses she had selected.

“What would you like me to wear first?” she asked, then stopped, her hand pressed to her mouth. Suddenly she realised the strangeness of her position—the danger in it too. Here she was, locked in a deserted studio with a bearded stranger she had met for the first time only a few hours earlier!

CHAPTER XVIII

PETER REDGRAVE strolled across the studio floor towards Sara, oblivious of the panic that was rising in her.

"Let's have a look at the clothes you've brought," he said and bent to examine them. "Let's start with this." He picked out a grey skirt and matching sweater. "Do you know where the dressing-room is? Well, bring your case and I'll show you."

He led her into a small mirror-lined room and switched on the lights. The glare was dazzling and Sara saw myriad reflections of herself.

"If Lucien had shown you in here, Lydia Durack could never have played such a dirty trick on you that day. Now start making-up, there's a sweetie. Lots of pancake but no rouge—and easy on the lipstick." He broke off and studied her facial structure in an impersonal manner. "Plenty of mascara and eyeshadow though, but don't overdo the eyebrows."

Sara could have sobbed her relief as she listened to Peter quietly listing these practical requirements. He was on the job and she was no more to him than a piece of clay to a sculptor, the raw material of his craft.

When he had finished explaining what he wanted, Peter left her alone, and as she changed and made-up, she could hear him clattering about in the studio.

"Sorry there's no mood music," he grinned as she came out of the dressing-room. "It'll be very different when I have my own studio!" He scrutinised her and then carefully disarranged her hair over her forehead and smoothed down her lipstick with a practised finger.

"Okay," he said, sticking a pencil and shorthand notebook in her hand, "you're in your office and the boss has just sent for you to take a letter. You like your boss," he added, "he's young, good looking and unmarried. Got the idea, honey?"

There was no posing, no complicated manoeuvring with the lights, nothing of what Peter himself would have dismissed contemptuously as *chi-chi*. He had his own method. He outlined the situation, told her what her emotions should be and left her to the task of putting it across to an audience—in this case the audience being a camera! He followed exactly the same process when she wore her white net party dress, a cocktail glass in her hand and when she posed in her blue suit, hurrying to meet her date under the clock.

"Right," he said, dimming the lights after the last shot. "Now we can spend the rest of the night praying these come out the way I see them up here in my head."

When Sara looked at her watch she was horrified to discover it was almost quarter to eleven. Hastily she collected her make-up and crammed her clothes back into her case while Peter tidied away the equipment.

When they were out in the street again, the door locked behind them, he breathed deeply and stretched his arms above his head.

"Brother, am I whacked!" He straightened his tie which had worked its way mysteriously round under his left ear.

"I hope I haven't worked you too hard, Sara? I forget everything when I'm on the job."

"It wasn't work," she assured him. "Not the way you do it. When will the prints be ready for me to see?"

"Tomorrow lunch-time. Wait for me outside here at one o'clock. Better make it here just in case I'm held up. If it's a nice day we can get sandwiches and eat them in the park. You know," he said, "I could do with something now. How about coffee before turning in?"

"I'd love to but I daren't. They lock the front door at the hostel at eleven."

"Poor Cinderella! But not to worry—I'll have you back in five minutes." He strode over to a Lambretta parked by the kerb. "Jump on and don't be scared. This is as safe as a Rolls!"

Carefully Sara straddled the back seat, arranging her skirt so that it should not fly above her head.

"You ought to see the girls in Italy," he laughed, watching her contortions. "They all ride their boy friends' Vespas side-saddle. It looks nice of course, but it's dangerous."

"I thought you weren't allowed to ride without a crash helmet," Sara commented somewhat disapprovingly as they tore off into the night.

"It's not considered illegal," he threw back over his shoulder at her, "only stupid! I left mine at home today. Overslept and tore out in a hurry. I'm not usually such a clot. I've even got a spare for my passengers. Next time you ride pillion with me I'll bring it."

"You take a lot for granted," Sara teased.

"That's what all my girl friends say."

"Have you got lots of girl friends, Peter?"

"Dozens," he boasted cheerfully as they drew to a stop outside the hostel. "Trouble is they all look on me as a brother!" He helped her on to the pavement and glanced at his watch. "Three minutes in hand. How's that for service?"

"Marvellous. Thanks for everything, Peter. That wonderful dinner and the pictures and—and everything."

He smiled at her understandingly. "Tomorrow then? Don't forget."

"As if I could," she said, and raced up the hostel steps.

When Sara arrived at the rendezvous next day, Peter was already waiting for her, a large packet under his arm, a bag of sandwiches in his hand and a spare crash helmet dangling from one finger.

"It's a lovely day," he said. "I thought we'd go and feed the ducks."

Sitting by the lake in St. James' Park, Peter handed Sara the batch of photographs, and with trembling fingers she lifted the flap of the envelope and drew them out.

There was a long silence as she studied them, glancing first at one and then another.

"They're still only rough," he said, his voice casual. "They'll look better when they're properly developed."

"Better?" she said. "Better? But they can't look better. They're sensational! Absolutely sensational!"

"Honestly? You're not kidding me, are you?"

"Of course I'm not kidding you!" She laughed exuberantly. "These are revolutionary. I look like a real person—a girl who eats and talks and *lives*. I've never seen anything like these before."

Peter could not hide his pleasure in Sara's response, and he beamed happily. "Let's hope Mrs. Lane reacts in the same way that you have."

"I'll take them to her at once," Sara promised. "I rang Polly this morning and she told me Mrs. Lane's in the office today."

Once more Sara boarded the Lambretta, and Peter deposited her outside the Model School.

"I'll push off back to the studio," he said. "Call me later on and let me know what happens."

Apprehensively Sara climbed the well-worn steps to the agency and pushed open the door. Polly was pounding away at the typewriter and pointed her finger towards the inner room. "Go in at once," she mouthed. "She's expecting you."

Sara entered Mrs. Lane's office and the Principal stood up and came towards her. She was thinner after her recent illness and her face was pale.

"My poor child, I can't understand it. Polly's told me you haven't got fixed up yet. I don't begin to understand what's been going on in my absence."

"You will when you've seen these," Sara told her grimly and passed over the photographs which Lucien had taken under Lydia Durack's supervision.

"But these aren't the ones Lucien took of you," Mrs. Lane exclaimed, setting down the prints with a look of disgust. "I saw them and they were quite charming."

"You saw the first set," Sara explained, "but they were lost. Or perhaps I should say someone 'lost' them."

Succinctly she gave an account of the happenings of the Monday when Mrs. Lane had first been taken ill, concluding with the true version of events that had led to her arriving late at the Board Meeting the day of her first interview.

"My dear child, if only you'd spoken up then."

"I didn't think I'd be believed. I couldn't quite believe it myself," Sara admitted. "It wasn't until afterwards when I met Nina and heard she was also in the running for the scholarship that I began to understand."

Mrs. Lane sighed deeply. "I spoke to her, Sara, as I told you I would, after that ridiculous incident with the book, and I was sure then she had come to her senses. I suppose seeing you snatch the gold medal from Nina was too much for her. And then, my being away ill must have made it all so easy." Mrs. Lane sat down at her desk and rested her head in her hands. "You're a young girl and at the moment you're full of very righteous indignation for which, goodness knows, no-one is going to blame you. But even so if you knew Mme. Durack's full story, I think you might bring yourself to forgive her."

"I don't think it's important for me to forgive her," Sara

said harshly. "The thing is that something should be done to stop her acting so horribly to any of your other pupils."

"But she would never have acted this way if it hadn't been for Nina," Mrs. Lane said. "I won't say she's the nicest person in the world, but like everyone else she has her good side and her bad, and she's an excellent teacher."

"And you feel sorry for her," Sara said drily.

"Yes I do. She's an unhappy woman fighting as hard as she knows to get all the things for her niece that she missed herself. As for Nina she's a spoilt and most unpleasant girl but she's a very good model. Almost as good as you. But let's not waste any more time talking. First of all I must get Lucien to take some new pictures of you. How he ever came to turn these out is beyond me—even with all Mme. Durack's machinations!"

"Before you get in touch with Lucien," Sara said quickly, "I'd like to show you some other photographs."

Mrs. Lane frowned. "You mean, you've had some taken on your own initiative?"

"Not exactly. Someone asked—someone asked me to pose." Quickly Sara handed Peter's photographs across the desk. "I'll explain when you've had a look."

Mrs. Lane studied the pictures, her expression changing from puzzlement to incredulity. "These are magnificent! Who took them? It must be somebody quite new or I'd recognise the style."

Sara took a deep breath. "It was Lucien's assistant."

"Peter Redgrave! The nice young man with the silly little beard? Well, this is certainly going to shake Lucien." She looked sharply at Sara. "Tell me, did he know about Peter taking these?"

"No. It was all done rather unexpectedly."

The Principal shook her head. "I'm afraid Lucien's not going to like it."

"But if they're good, surely he should be pleased?"

"It's not as simple as that. You see, it's difficult for people

who've achieved success to acknowledge that there are younger people coming up who may one day overtake them. Lucien's a fine photographer, but for the past few years he's been satisfied to rest on his reputation. In the fashion world we depend on change, it's our very life-blood, but some of us find it too difficult to keep up with new fashions and new techniques. Lucien is a little like that."

"Why don't you change your photographer then?"

"It's quite impossible. Lucien is on the Board. That's why these photographs of yours put me in an awkward position. I can't use them without telling Lucien that Peter took them."

"Peter's going to tell him himself this afternoon."

"Then he's a sensible boy as well as a talented one. I'm sure it will work out all right. Meantime, do you feel up to going for an audition this afternoon?"

"Do I feel up to it! Oh please, Mrs. Lane, where?"

Mrs. Lane rubbed the side of her cheek pensively. "This is going to be irregular, but I think we can manage it. It's something rather special, you see, and I have the feeling you might very well be the girl they're looking for. Have you ever heard of Marc Donnell?"

"Isn't he a new dress designer?" Sara asked.

"Yes. He used to work in Paris at a big 'house' but he's recently started on his own. He hasn't done much so far, but in my opinion his clothes are exciting in exactly the same way that these photographs of Peter's are exciting. They're new in concept and they're all created with an eye to the future and not the past. The House of Donnell is not a top one yet, but it might turn out to be the greatest courturièrs of the future."

"It sounds wonderful."

"I knew you'd think so," Mrs. Lane told her. "But I'm afraid there's one snag. We've already sent Nina after the job."

"I don't care."

"Maybe not. But it means more competition between you two, and that's asking for trouble."

"Please, Mrs. Lane, I'm willing to risk it."

"I somehow thought you would be." The Principal hesitated. "Very well. I suppose the mere fact that I told you must mean that I'd like you to get the job!" She pressed the buzzer on her desk and Polly put her head round the door. "Let Sara have Donnell's address," she instructed, "and give her full details of how to get there. All right, Sara, take your photographs and meantime I'll get on the phone and tell Donnell's to expect you. The audition's at four o'clock and it's three-thirty now so you've just got time to make it."

Marc Donnell's salon occupied a small house in Shepherd Market. It was modern and gay and contemporary, not at all the gilt and crystal which Sara had always automatically connected in her mind with *haute couture*.

"So you're Mrs. Lane's afterthought, are you?" said a pleasant middle-aged woman who came across the grey carpet towards her. "Mr. Donnell wanted to see your photographs before agreeing to let you audition, but now I've seen *you*, I don't think that'll be necessary! You're only just in time, so hurry and I'll get you through to the dressing-room right away."

The first person Sara saw as she walked into the dressing-room was Nina Durack, and the girl stared at her as if she had been a ghost.

"How did you get here?" she hissed.

The four other models in the room, who had been sent by different Agencies, regarded Nina in astonishment, but Sara pretended to be indifferent to the animosity in the girl's voice. For the first time she felt she was meeting Nina as an equal. The days of intimidation, of feelings of inferiority were over. She was as good as Nina, better

maybe, and it was time this fact was acknowledged.

"Mrs. Lane sent me," she said. "And I've some more news for you. She's starting to ask questions."

"What questions?" Nina asked, licking her lips nervously.

"About missing photographs," Sara said airily.

"She can't prove—"

Nina stopped short, realising she had given herself away and Sara decided not to press her advantage. She unfastened her case and began to lay out her make-up. Fortunately at that moment the middle-aged woman whose name was Mrs. Fielding, returned to the dressing-room.

"Well," she told Sara, "my judgement's been approved. Mr. Donnell's seen your pictures and likes them. He thought the photographs were sensational and I assured him the original was even better. You'll go on last but hurry with your make-up."

She gave the rest of the girls their order of appearance and then returned to the salon. In a few moments they heard a voice calling, "All right, first girl on," and a tall blonde who reminded Sara of Diana gave a last anxious pat on her hair and went through the door. The audition was on.

Five minutes later the blonde returned, her ordeal over.

"Wow!" she exclaimed. "Is he something or is he something? He must be the best looking couturière in the business!"

"Second model, please," the voice called, and a dark haired girl hurried out.

She too returned in a dazed condition from impact with the exciting young designer, and the air of tension in the dressing-room grew as it began to be apparent to the girls that this was a special job they were after, not just a routine one. Sara's pulses quickened. None of the other girls, she felt certain, came anywhere near Nina or herself,

although of course one could not go entirely on looks and the only ultimate judge of a model girl was to see her in action.

"It's between Nina and me," came the startling thought. "And I won the gold medal so I must be just that bit better." As hope flooded through her she crossed her fingers, praying that the Gods were not even now laughing at her for her conceit.

She bent down to make certain her stocking seams were straight and Nina, who was next to audition, began moving towards the door. In passing, Nina's elbow came in contact with a cup of water one of the other girls had left on the dressing-table. In a flash it toppled and water cascaded over Sara's head and shoulders!

It could have been an accident yet when Sara saw the flicker of triumph on Nina's lips as she went to take her stand by the door, she knew it had been deliberately done. One of the other girls grabbed a towel and passed it to Sara who mopped hopelessly at her sopping head. Her careful hair-style hung round her face in limp tendrils and there was absolutely nothing that she could do with it in the time left to her.

"Pin it up in a bun," someone suggested.

"How can she?" someone else said. "She won't have time."

"If we tell them what's happened maybe they'll hold things up to give her a chance to fix it."

Even in her misery Sara could have hugged these girls for their concern over a rival's misfortune. How different from Nina. Nina who had beaten her at the last minute.

"I'll go out like this," she thought defiantly. "I'll tell them Nina did it." Even as the idea came to mind she rejected it as childish and petty. Screaming vengeance against Nina was not going to help. But what would? Suddenly her eye fell on an enormous white fur hat lying on Nina's chair. It belonged to Lydia Durack and Nina

must have borrowed it meaning to model it. She had obviously lost her nerve at the last minute and had decided not to model something so extreme.

As Nina, a smug smile on her face, came back through the door, Sara seized up the hat and pulled it low down on her forehead, thrusting all her hair completely underneath it.

"What are you doing with my hat?" Nina screeched. "It'll get wet. You'll ruin it!"

"If I do it'll be your fault," Sara laughed and side-stepped neatly as Nina lunged forward. Two of the girl's blocked Nina's way and a third pushed her into a chair, leaving Sara free to sail out through the door and into the salon.

Her mind was whirling to such an extent that she had made two complete turns before she even thought to look in Marc Donnell's direction. When she did it was all she could do not to stop dead in the middle of the floor. With a supreme effort she forced herself to go on without faltering, without any show of the emotion that had suddenly seized her.

She could understand now why the other girls had raved about him. He had something above conventional good looks; there was an aliveness, an air of authority surrounding his thin frame that one could sense without even speaking to him.

He was younger than she had been led to expect—in his early twenties—and the extreme blackness of his hair and paleness of his skin bespoke a background which was not British. Indeed, when she came to know him she learned that his mother was French and his father Irish—an interesting combination which had shown itself at an early age in his desire to create clothes.

Taken feature by feature he was not handsome; the nose being too long, the mouth too thin and his ears pointed like a faun. Yet taken as a whole he exuded incredible charm

and—Sara thought with a catch in her breath—sex appeal.

How marvellous to work for a man like this, a man who was not only talented and good looking, but also young! A man, in fact, of her own generation!

Something of what she felt must have been apparent in her demeanour, for as their eyes met there was a flash of recognition in his, as if he too felt the need for someone young and vital about him. He gave her a slight smile and with an effort she remembered not to smile back—a model was supposed to be above such things!

Remembering to display the swing of her skirt she turned her back on him and walked towards the dressing-room.

“No, no, don’t go.” His voice came across the salon, soft yet quick. “Come back. I want to talk to you.”

Unable to believe her ears, Sara retraced her steps and the closer she drew, the stronger she felt his magnetism.

“Closer,” he said impatiently. “I won’t bite you!” He indicated a chair on his right and Sara sat down in it and hid her trembling hands in the folds of her dress. Marc Donnell stared at her in silence and then turned to the woman on his other side.

“My search is ended, Maggie. This is the girl I’ve been looking for since I started to create clothes.” He turned to Sara. “You’ll work for me, of course? I won’t take no for an answer.”

“Of—of course,” she stammered. “That’s—that’s why I came here today.”

“Good. From now on you belong to the House of Donnell!”

Sara thought she was going to faint with excitement. To think that she, Sara Gay, belonged to the House of Donnell! Unbidden, a bubble of laughter rose in her throat and she had to swallow it back. Now was certainly not the time to start giggling like a schoolgirl, even if it was only from nerves!

"I'll discuss your salary with Mrs. Lane," he went on, "but I'd like you to start as soon as possible. Will Monday be all right?"

"Yes. What time shall I be here?"

"Ten o'clock. But I hope you won't object to long hours? When I start my new Collection I want to design most of it on you."

"I don't care how hard I work," Sara said solemnly. "It'll mean everything to me to feel a part of what you're doing and not be regarded only as a clothes horse!"

"That's what I want you to feel. You may go now."

Sara returned to the dressing-room and again his voice stopped her. "Sara Gay?"

She swung round. "Yes, Mr. Donnell?"

"Don't wear that hat again. You're beautiful enough without startling me with that Eskimo creation!"

"I only put it on because my hair—"

"Looked an absolute sight," he finished for her. "Don't expect me to believe *that* one."

"I wouldn't," Sara said demurely and retreated, wondering humorously what he would have said had she whipped off her hat and showed him exactly how awful her hair *did* look!

Luckily there was no-one else in the dressing-room, for Maggie had taken the opportunity of dismissing the other girls while her employer had been talking to Sara. For this Sara was grateful, since she would have felt embarrassed at receiving the congratulations of girls whom she knew had desperately wanted this job. She stared at the hat in her hands. How furious Nina would be to know that her despicable trick had failed.

"I think I'll tell Nina that Mr. Donnell engaged me because he adored the hat." Instantly she dismissed the thought. The world of the model girl was so small that she and Nina were bound to come face to face on many an occasion, and possibly even fight for other jobs in the

future. To antagonise her any more would be unnecessary and foolish.

Quickly she changed into her outdoor things and sped down the stairs to the street. It was only as she reached the pavement that she recognised the stocky young man who disentangled himself from the railings and came towards her.

"Peter! Whatever are you doing here?"

"I popped up to the Agency and Mrs. Lane told me you'd come here for an audition. I thought I'd meet you and take you out for a coffee."

"What a lovely thought."

Together they walked down the road into Park Lane where Peter escorted her into an elegant coffee bar.

"Couldn't you have found something a bit cheaper?" she remarked as they sat down.

"What's money?" he grinned and flipped a coin on the table.

It was not until the waitress had placed two cups of coffee in front of them that Peter leaned forward and touched Sara's cheek with one stubby yet gentle finger.

"No need to ask whether or not you think you've got the job. You obviously believe you stand a good chance. I can tell that from the look in your eyes."

"It's more than just thinking," she said and then threw modesty to the wind. "Gosh, Peter, I've got it! Mr. Donnell practically fell over himself to give it to me."

Peter's mouth dropped open and he looked so surprised that she burst out laughing.

"Well I must say you're not very flattering," she pouted. "Didn't you think I'd get it?"

"I was afraid to let myself think," he confessed. "I knew how much it meant to you and . . . Anyway, old girl, I can't tell you how pleased I am. You're really on your way to the top now."

"Thanks to you. I don't know what would have

happened to me if you hadn't taken those other pictures."

"You'd have still got to the top."

She shook her head and sipped her coffee and Peter leaned back in his chair. As he did so Sara became conscious of a strange air of dejection about him, an air which he tried to hide the moment he became conscious that she was watching him.

"What's happened, Peter? You look a bit down in the dumps."

"I'm fine."

"No you're not. I can see by the look on your face. Come on, Peter. What is it?"

Realising that she would not be sidetracked, he took a deep breath and said quickly: "I've been fired."

Sara stared at him in amazement. "Good Lord. How awful. It was because of me, wasn't it? Because of those pictures you took?"

He nodded. "Lucien was furious."

"But they were wonderful pictures."

"That's why! If they'd been awful he wouldn't have cared. But as it is he sees me as competition and decided to get rid of me."

All Sara's pleasure in her new job evaporated, swamped by a feeling of guilt at Peter's news. No matter how lightly he appeared to take it and how generously he exonerated her from all blame, she felt that part of the fault lay on her shoulders.

"I'm going to see Lucien," she said suddenly, "and tell him he's got to give you your job back."

"You'll do nothing of the sort. Heavens, this is just what I've been waiting for. I'm *glad* he's given me the sack. I'd never have had the courage to leave on my own, but now I'm jobless I'll have to take a chance on myself."

"What do you mean?"

Peter's voice was loud with enthusiasm. "You wanted to be a model and you put your ability to the test. You

entered a beauty competition and then tried for a scholarship. Well, I'm going to test my ability too. I want to take photographs in a different way and I'm going to go ahead and do it, even if I have to starve in the process! But you like my work and darn it, Sara, you're not unique, after all. There are bound to be other people willing to let me try out my ideas on them. I'm going to use the money I've saved to open a small studio. It won't be in Mayfair, I'm afraid—more likely Balham—but at least I'll be my own boss and I can photograph what I want in the way I want."

Any doubts Sara might have had were dispelled by Peter's enthusiasm. After all, what did he have to lose? He was young and single with no-one to depend on him and no demands. He was doing the right thing in taking a chance on his ability; doing the only thing that a person of talent should do: follow their own ideas and hope that one day they would be recognised.

"It's strange," she said softly, "that you and I should both be starting out together. Me with Marc Donnell and you on your own. Oh Peter, where do you think we'll be a year from now?"

"Goodness knows. But let's look on the bright side, Sara, and say that you might be showing clothes in front of the Royals and I might be photographing them!"

On a note of laughter they paid the bill and walked out of the coffee bar. Dusk had fallen and the street lamps were lit, throwing their shadows across the pavement. A soft breeze stirred Sara's skirts, whirling them softly about her long, graceful legs and pushing back a soft strand of hair from her face to kiss with tender fingers the curve of her cheek. Workers hurrying home jostled against them, but Sara did not mind for suddenly she was a part of them: a part of this great, teeming throng. The past and all its quarrels and disasters was put behind her and forgotten, the only thing of which she was conscious was the

future—the days and months and years ahead; glittering hours of fresh hopes, and ambitions.

She caught Peter's hand and squeezed it.

"I wouldn't change us for any other couple in the world!"

"Neither would I," he grinned.

Suddenly they started to laugh and hand in hand ran down the road.

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